

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 9-10, 2008
St. John's Lutheran Church
Rev. Jack Meehan
1 Kings 19:1-18

“Elijah: Weary of Doing the Right Thing”

Sometimes in the course of this life, we may become weary of doing the right thing. Have you ever found yourself in a situation in life where you have done your best to do the right thing – not necessarily the easy thing – only to find that it has actually worked against you? Instead of supporting you for doing the right thing, people have turned their backs on you. Instead of recognition or reward for doing the right thing, there is retribution and retaliation. If the system in which we live and work is corrupt or dishonest, then doing the right thing becomes increasingly difficult. It can happen in families, school, the work place, government, even in church. In short, it can happen anywhere. And it can lead to resentment and bitterness. Today, we encounter one such person who was weary of doing the right thing; who was burned out and without intervention would have gone into a terrible downward spiral. That person was Elijah the prophet. He is our “Portrait of Faith” for today, and so the theme for this message is “Elijah: Weary of Doing the Right Thing.” May God’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

It may come as a surprise to think that such a pillar of faith, a prophet of the Lord God, like Elijah would become weary of doing the right thing. And this is exactly why it’s so important for us to focus on this topic today. People of Scripture like Elijah are not carved in marble or etched in stained glass. They were just like us: flesh and blood people who experienced all the ups and downs of life that human beings are prone to. Although he certainly was a man of great faith, Elijah was, like us, a sinful human being. We see him at his lowest point in the Scripture lesson for today: beaten down, depressed, so weary of doing the right thing that he wanted to die. In fact, that’s exactly what he asked God for: **“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers”** (1 Kings 19:4).

The reason Elijah wanted to die was that in doing the right thing, his life was now on the line. For the sake of Lord God of Israel, he had confronted the false prophets of Baal, who were officially sanctioned and approved by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel of Israel. Not only did Elijah confront the prophets of Baal, he also confronted the false beliefs of his own people who were playing both ends against the middle in matters of faith. They were worshiping God but also worshiping Baal, the god of Jezebel. It was an expedient thing for the people to do. But as we know, the expedient thing is not always the right thing. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest on top of Mt. Carmel. The contest was who could make it rain, God or Baal. Whoever could make it rain after a 3-year drought would be the winner. There on Mt. Carmel, Elijah blasts his own people for their wishy-washy expedient faith: **“How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him”** (1 Kings 18:21). The contest which then follows ends with Elijah’s sacrifice to God being received by fire from heaven, together with the wood, stones, dust, and the precious water that Elijah had poured out on the sacrifice, not once, not twice, but three times. Elijah then orders the 450 prophets of Baal to be executed. This is where the Scripture lesson picks up. Queen Jezebel quashes whatever victory celebration Elijah may have been having, making it clear that she has ordered her hit men to find him and kill him. Elijah is probably thinking to himself: “This is what I get for doing the right thing?” He flees for his life, and retreats into the wilderness. Weary of doing the right thing, Elijah asks God to let him die.

In his exhaustion, Elijah forgot that God’s saving presence was with him under that scraggly broom tree there in the wilderness just as much as it had been on the top of Mt. Carmel. There in the wilderness, Elijah is sustained by an angel who provides bread and water, strengthening him for what’s ahead. God wasn’t finished with Elijah, not by a long shot. Elijah journeyed to Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God, and

we're told, **"There he came to a cave and lodged in it"** (1 Kings 19:9). I think that's significant! Elijah went into his cave – literally! When we feel like Elijah – exhausted, weary of doing the right thing, ready to give up – we go into our cave, too. But even there, God, as he always does, comes looking for his lost ones. He asks Elijah what he's doing there. Elijah repeats his sob story, how he has been faithful and true, and how there is no one left except him: **"... and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away"** (1 Kings 19:10). God invites Elijah to come out of his cave. A terrible wind swept by, an earthquake, and a fire, but God was not in any of these. Then, in sheer silence, a still small voice comes to Elijah. God asks him again what he's doing there, and again Elijah repeats his tale of woe. Notice that God doesn't give Elijah any sympathy or commiseration – nothing like that. What God does give Elijah is his next assignment, but only after reassuring him that he is not the last believer, and he is not alone – there are 7000 others! God comes to Elijah in his weariness in order to restore and strengthen him.

I call this phenomenon the "Elijah syndrome," and it happens to the best of us. Feeling beaten down and weary, we retreat into our cave feeling alone and isolated, so wrapped up in our own pain that it takes a lot more than wind, earthquake, or fire to restore our faith. It takes God himself coming to us to do that. And that is exactly what God has done: coming to us not just in awesome and terrifying things like windstorms, earthquakes, and fires. God has come to us in the still, small voice of a Child, born in Bethlehem, the Word made flesh, who lived among us – who lives among us – full of grace and truth. This still, small voice, this "low whisper," spoke in his earthly life as he healed diseased and broken bodies, cast out demons, fed the hungry, stilled the storm, and announced that God's kingdom had broken into our troubled world, penetrating even into our darkest caves. Upon the cross, this voice cried out, "It is finished!" and it was – all the work of God's searching and forgiving love, accomplished there at Calvary.

There's an awful lot of Elijah in us, no doubt about it. But there's even more of Christ in us. And so with Christ's presence beside us, his peace before us, his strength behind us, his love beneath us, we are lifted up, and like Elijah, given our next assignment to serve in God's kingdom. May God help us to do this, for Jesus' sake. Amen.