

Following Jesus is no easy task. You’ve probably known that for quite some time. And as we’ve discovered, it’s much easier to follow at a distance—as I’ve been saying throughout the season of Lent. There are many reasons for this, several of which we have already considered. However, there is another major contributor to us keeping a distance from Jesus. And that is fear.

If you recall Peter’s experience in the courtyard of the high priest after Jesus’ arrest, you’ll remember that it was a terrifying scene. Peter experienced a number of dramatic events, all crammed into a short period of time. The Gospels record that Jesus turned the Passover supper on its head with a foot-washing and with alarming predictions of his betrayal and death. Then Judas walked out on the group and Peter and the other disciples fell asleep in the garden while Jesus was praying, which led to yet another rebuke from Jesus. Judas then led a band of soldiers to the garden to confront Jesus. Peter attacked the high priest’s servant with a sword, cutting off the man’s ear and prompting Jesus to heal yet one more person before they led him away. Finally, Peter found himself standing in the courtyard, most likely scared to death. It is no wonder that he lurked in the shadows, away from the fire (see Luke 22). *Fear is an incredible obstacle to faith.* Fear undermines. It blocks faith and vision. It disrupts our life direction. It keeps us from seeing God’s picture of our lives and discovering our God mission.

Peter was sidetracked by fear that night in the courtyard of the high priest and so was Elijah when he ran from the wrath of Jezebel. Elijah was one of God’s mighty prophets in the days of King Ahab and his treacherous wife Jezebel. In a time when the people of God were following at a comfortable distance, Elijah was following up close in the thick of things. He stood with integrity and spoke with courage and boldness. Elijah knew how to depend on God. God led him into hiding in the wilderness for his safety, fed him for an entire year with food carried by ravens, and then showed him the way to a widow who was able to provide him shelter from his enemies.

Elijah understood that God was in control. He experienced the power of God working through him to resurrect a widow's son and to bring fire down on an altar when the priests of Baal were unable to. Elijah was faithful, focused, and obedient, standing so close to the fire that he was almost always in danger of being burned. And that is often when fear enters the picture.

When we follow Jesus in his way, we will almost always encounter resistance. The fire can get very hot and there will always be disruptions that challenge our commitment to follow him. That is what happened to Elijah. He experienced great prophetic success, but even as he sought to be faithful to God, forces of resistance came against him, bringing him to the end of his rope. Queen Jezebel had been systematically murdering the spiritual leaders of Israel, and now she set her sights on Elijah. The prophet was so terrified that he ran for his life. His God mission was disrupted, and he was sidetracked by fear.

Elijah's experience is common to all of us. We may grow spiritually and mature in our devotion and faith. We may believe we are living out our God mission. But then the world throws some sort of resistance or disruption at us. Maybe we experience a spiritual plateau and suddenly we're paralyzed. The forward movement of our spiritual journey becomes stalled.

I know a friend of a friend who is a wellspring of faith and encouragement. She faithfully attends worship on Sundays and has been a significant source of spiritual mentoring for many people. One day, however, she stopped coming. My pastor friend e-mailed her, wondering what was wrong. She would e-mail back occasionally, but she didn't return to church. My friend eventually lost contact with her altogether, until finally, she contacted her pastor, asking to talk. They met, and as her story unfolded, it became clear she was experiencing, among other things, a kind of spiritual paralysis. Despite the depth of her faith and the significance of her ministry in the church and community, she doubted her place in the Kingdom. Her faith stalled and she feared she wasn't "spiritual enough." Living in fear she retreated from her community of faith—the very people who could support her and carry her through. The further she retreated, the greater her paralysis became.

Elijah experienced fear and paralysis and he dealt with it by running away to a broom bush, and then to the dark interior of a cave on Mount Sinai. We humans have discovered many methods to deal with fear. One of the first methods we turn to is *control*. When something bad happens to us, we try to find our footing and grasp for a feeling of control, to do everything in our power to keep this bad thing from happening. Many of us try to control things by retreating. Elijah tried to take control of his life by running away. It's a basic human instinct. In the wonderful, animated kid's movie *Finding Nemo*, a clownfish, Marlin, experiences the tragic loss of his entire family in a barracuda attack. Only one tiny fish egg remains. As he holds the egg in his fins, Marlin says, "There, there, there, it's okay, Daddy's here; Daddy's got you. I promise I will never let anything happen to you Nemo." Thus begins Marlin's quest to control every aspect of Nemo's life, to ensure his safety and "not let anything happen to him."

In truth, control is a figment of our imaginations, a fact that Marlin soon learns when Nemo is unexpectedly taken far away from home. Even Dory, the forgetful royal-blue Tang fish who joins Marlin in his search for Nemo, recognizes how elusive our quest for control truly is. When she and Marlin are inside a whale and Marlin is ready to give up the search, he tells her of his promise never to let anything happen to Nemo. Dory's response is simply, "Huh, that's a funny thing to promise." Dory at least recognizes that there is no way to control life. Life unfolds regardless of our attempts to rein it in.

That is exactly what Elijah discovers. He experienced great victories in his life, but now he finds himself in a state of fear and paralysis because he can't control the events unfolding around him. He's under a broom bush. He can't eat, he can't sleep, and he is so fearful that he even asks God to end his life. When we get to this point, it's very very hard to hear God anymore. This was the case with my pastor friend's parishioner. She couldn't discern God's direction. She was filled with doubt, fed by her isolation.

Committing ourselves to following Jesus does not mean that we will be spared times of crisis like these—moments when we are filled with fear and paralysis.

However, if we are to continue to follow Jesus side by side, rather than at a distance, we must make use of the spiritual resources that God provides. Elijah's experience can help us understand those resources. Elijah travels from the broom bush to the depths of a cave on Mount Sinai. The Lord finds him there and asks a very important question: "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" (1 Kings 19:9). It's as though God is asking, "Why would you hide in this place after all I've done? Don't you remember my power? Have you forgotten my love for you? What are you doing here so full of fear and doubt?"

God asks, but then God directs, and God's direction provides us with insight. God offers Elijah, and us, two specific spiritual resources: *Visioning and Speaking*. As we journey through life, God wants us to have a *vision* of faith always before us. God tells Elijah, "*Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by*" (1 Kings 19:11). Remember that Elijah was on a mountaintop. Mountains are places of vision, after all. Sightlines are extended. Our perspective changes when we view things from a mountain. When Elijah stood on the mountain, the Lord passed by, and Elijah was given a renewed vision of faith. Envisioning faith is difficult because we limit ourselves to what is visible from our current vantage point. But that is not what faith is all about.

Elijah was focused on the circumstances that surrounded him. Jezebel threatened him, a threat she could easily carry out as evidenced by the bodies of those she had already killed. In *Finding Nemo*, Marlin was focused on the visible circumstances of loss, the loss of his wife, the loss of Nemo, and then on the visible circumstances of being trapped inside a whale. Our inclination is to focus on what's easiest to see, so we pull back and begin to follow at a distance. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that "*faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*" So, following in Jesus' way is not merely about what is visible. It's about the invisible promise of God. It's about realizing that nothing has changed, even though our circumstances might lead us to believe it has. God's promise *continues to be valid*. God is *still present* with us. Everything that God has envisioned for our lives *remains intact*.

God offers Elijah the spiritual resource of *faith visioning* to help him push through his state of paralysis and follow more closely. The Lord also instructs Elijah to tell Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha about what he has experienced, anointing Hazael and Jehu as kings, and Elisha as the next prophet. God’s directive to *speak*—to do what prophets are supposed to do—is a significant step in Elijah’s journey, as it is for us if we are to overcome our difficulties.

*The Italian Job* is a movie about some sophisticated thieves who coordinated their talents to steal millions of dollars’ worth of gold bars. Each has a particular skill that he or she brings to the group, plus a creative nickname. One thief, Lyle, is a computer genius who wants the others to call him “The Napster,” because he insists that he invented the music downloading software that changed the music industry. He claims his college roommate stole the idea from him and went on to make millions. His colleagues aren’t sure they can believe his story, thinking someone else created Napster. But when Lyle proves himself by contributing much to the success of their heist, they set their skepticism aside and acquiesce to his nickname request.

That’s a silly example of an important truth: If we hold an idea or belief within us, it will always remain *just an idea*. It will never become a reality. By speaking our idea out loud, by sharing it with others, it becomes a reality. By speaking, we give life to our ideas and beliefs. They begin to exist outside of us, becoming animated and dynamic. That is why the apostle Paul gives these instructions to the Romans: “*For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved*” (Romans 10:10).

When we proclaim our faith out loud, it becomes dynamic and alive. *Speaking* our faith gives life to the idea of our belief, moving it outside of ourselves. It requires that we move beyond an internal spirituality, where no one knows about our commitment, and where no one holds us accountable. *Visioning faith* and *speaking faith* enables us to follow Jesus side by side—even through times of paralysis and fear. Whenever you must choose between faith and fear, always in every circumstance choose faith. The Lord is with us. Amen.