

One of the reasons I love the story of the Bible is that it tells the truth, even the awful truth about its heroes. Abraham was a liar. Jacob was a thief. Moses was a murderer. David was an adulterer. Heroes of our faith, yes, but the biblical writers refuse to gloss over their blatant shortcomings. It shows them “warts and all.” We’re looking at one of those “warts” in our Scripture passage today—and it’s on one of the greatest men of old—the prophet Elijah.

Three years earlier, at the urging of the Lord, Elijah had announced a drought as punishment on the nation of Israel for its idolatry and worship of the Canaanite god Baal, which was instigated by the wicked Queen Jezebel. You may recall from your Sunday School lessons, or from last Sunday’s sermon, that a contest was arranged on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal to determine once and for all just who was *the one true God*. Each built an altar for their god and then a sacrifice would be made. The god who answered by fire, consuming the sacrifice, would be the winner. All day long the prophets of Baal danced and prayed and whined, and prayed some more, all without result. Finally, at the end of the day, Elijah prayed his relatively short prayer and God answered by fire! BIG time! Yahweh wins! Elijah wins!

The prophets of Baal had been exterminated, the rains have begun again, and except for the very real threat of retribution from Queen Jezebel, Elijah should have been feeling on top of the world. But no. Verse 3 says, *“Elijah was afraid and ran for his life.”* He was in a funk. He went out into the wilderness, away from all human contact, lay down under a tree and basically said, “All right, Lord, enough is enough. I have had it with this prophet business. I have been on the front lines for you my entire life. I have been the leader of the pack in every one of your causes, on call 24/7, worked my fingers to the bone. And what do I get for it? Jezebel has a contract out on me. Why should I bother? The people will never REALLY listen. All they care about is themselves. It has been that way for generations and will always be that way. I break my neck to do what is right, to try to get them to do what is right, but it never works. I am burned up and burned out. Like the guy in that old movie, ‘I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.’ Just get it over with and kill me now.”

Quite a speech. One might expect that the Lord would respond with something like, “There, there, Elijah. Chill out. It’s OK. You are doing a fine job. Don’t be so depressed. It will all work out in the end.” But the Lord doesn’t say anything like that. The Lord doesn’t say anything. Just silence. You can picture the prophet looking around after that emotional

volcanic eruption under the broom bush against the pale blue desert sky. “Is anybody there? Does anybody care?” Finally, Elijah took that time-honored temporary escape—he fell asleep.

Why should Elijah be so depressed? After all, as much as any other person alive he saw the evidence of God’s power. He watched as God provided an unending supply of food for the poor widow that offered him hospitality. He participated in God’s restoration to life of a desperately ill young boy. He was God’s field commander in that great victory on Mt. Carmel. One would expect that Elijah of all people would never hit bottom. But he did.

What causes depression of this kind? A good part of the answer, I think, is sheer frustration. Many years ago after a funeral for one of the most faithful leaders in a neighboring congregation, back when I was a rookie pastor, I asked my neighbor and colleague if that was the toughest thing about being a pastor, having to bury a dedicated member of the church. He said, “No, not at all. A Christian funeral is a celebration of Christ’s resurrection; and ours. The toughest thing about being a minister,” he said, “is going to a Session or committee meeting, watching people act so absolutely contrary to everything you have been preaching and teaching, and wondering if you’ve made a bit of difference in anyone’s life.” Elijah probably would say AMEN to that.

Of course, preachers are not the only ones who have to deal with frustration and despair. People break their necks to do the best possible job and then find they are out of work because a corporate raider takes over the company. A father and mother try to give their children a proper upbringing but are now crazy with worry because their teenage son has been arrested for selling drugs. A husband sits quietly by, unable to do anything, as his wife slowly wastes away, because of the advance of a terminal illness. A marriage that had started with such promise of excitement years ago has now drifted into day after day of mutual boredom. A wonderful marriage is now over, ended by the cold hand of death, leaving the survivor to wonder if there will ever again be any laughter in life. A list like that could go on and on. *Psychology Today* pointed out years ago that the average American is *10 times more likely* to be depressed than their father or mother was and *20 times more likely* than their grandparents. As Thoreau wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

Is there any word from the Lord on this? Is anybody there? Does anybody care? As I said at the beginning, one of the reasons I love the story of the Bible is that it’s not blind to human frailty, even among the heroes of our faith. But another reason is that the Bible

DOES have a word from the Lord. It offers strength to overcome our frailty, in this case the feelings of depression that sometimes come to even the strongest of us. But please do not misunderstand. What I am offering this morning is not some automatic cure-all. Some situations may require professional help, but our feelings of despair and hopelessness may also have practical responses that will help.

Look what happens with Elijah: *“All at once an angel touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat.’ He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the LORD came back a second time and touched him and said, ‘Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.’ So he got up and ate and drank”* (19:5-8). It comes as no surprise that proper nutrition and rest are critical to a balanced mental attitude. Overstressed, underpaid workaholics inevitably experience personal troubles. Elijah’s body and mind were an integrated whole. His body needed to be right before his mind could be right.

Then when Elijah woke up again the narrative says, *“Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God”* (v. 8). The message here is not to overcome depression by running away or even going on an extended vacation. What is significant is Elijah’s destination. Mt. Horeb was the place where Moses first met God in the burning bush. Also known as Sinai, it is the place where God gave the Law. For Elijah, a trip to that holy mountain was a pilgrimage to his spiritual roots, a place to rekindle memories, to recall all God had done throughout history. The mountain would force Elijah to think about something other than himself.

More was needed, of course. As the Scripture continues, *“There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”* One more time, Elijah explodes. *“I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. **I am the only one left**, and now they are trying to kill me too”* (vss. 9-10). He sounds so exasperated. TWICE he says, ***I am the only one left.***

Have you ever prayed like that? There is nothing wrong with it, but it’s not as if God doesn’t already know how we feel. God knows. Letting it all hang out can be therapeutic, but truth be told we are never the only one. WE ARE NOT ALONE. As someone said, “A trouble shared is a trouble halved.” That may overstate things, but the words of the old hymn do not: *Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

There is another step to bouncing back. God told Elijah, “*Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by*” (v. 11). Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, *but the Lord was not in the wind*. After the wind there was an earthquake, *but the Lord was not in the earthquake*. After the earthquake came a fire, *but the Lord was not in the fire*. And after the fire came *a gentle whisper*. The message here for anyone who is occasionally depressed is that furious activity—wind, earthquake, fire—is not the answer. Time for quiet reflection, to hear the Lord’s whisper, is needed. The prophet makes excuses again, but this time God responds with some work for him to do.

I read somewhere about a group of aspiring psychiatrists who were attending their first class on emotional extremes. Their professor began, “Mr. Jones, just to establish some parameters, what is the opposite of joy?” “Sadness,” said the student. “And the opposite of despair, Ms. Smith?” She thought a moment and said, “Elation.” “How about the opposite of woe, Mr. Brown?” The student replied, “I believe, sir, that is GIDDYUP.”

The funk of depression will never be dispelled by sitting alone somewhere and feeling sorry for ourselves. Get back to the real world and get busy with your normal tasks. Remember once again Elijah’s claim, *I am the only one left*, the last faithful person on earth! The Lord lets him know that is not the case. There are thousands more. When we are deep in the pits, we rarely think straight and tend to exaggerate our predicament; and despite all evidence to the contrary, we DO have people who stand by us, who care, and who will see us through.

Personally, I think there are many of us today who are still experiencing a “Covid Depression” that we are trying to crawl out of. The word from the Lord in this is that deep depression occasionally happens to the best of us and the story of Elijah offers a prescription for dealing with it. “Is anybody there? Does anybody care?” We know from Elijah’s story that WE ARE NEVER ALONE. Take care of yourself physically (eat right, get proper rest, exercise, take a day off when you’re supposed to). Don’t neglect your spiritual life, study, prayer or fellowship. Let’s realize that things are probably not so bleak as we think they are. And finally, **please remember that you are never alone!** And “*there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother*” (Proverbs 18:24), our Lord Jesus. He is the one who invites us, in our deepest, darkest times to, “*Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden.*” All you Elijahs: *Your labor is not in vain!* Amen.

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