Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost

August 8, 2021

1 Kings 19:4-8

Every time I read the story of Elijah, I find something new in it. A new question, a new insight, a new puzzle to work through.

Elijah basically appears out of nowhere in chapter 17. He declares to Ahab, king of Israel, that there will be a drought. It won’t rain again until Elijah says so.

After this, God sends him away, telling him that God will provide for his care. Not just once, but twice, including in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A few years later, God sends Elijah back to King Ahab to announce that the drought will be ending.

When he arrives in Samaria, where Ahab lived, Elijah meets up with Obadiah, who promptly tells Elijah that he’s been busy hiding 100 priests who are faithful to God, so that they can be safe. Because Ahab is *really* unhappy with Elijah and with the God that Elijah and the priests serve.

Nonetheless, Elijah insists he’s going to meet with the king.

What happens next seems, in retrospect, to get out of hand. After a magnificent display of God’s might, in the face of absolutely no response from Baal, Elijah has the 450 priests of Baal killed. This, I should note, was not part of God’s instructions to Elijah.

The deaths of the priests of Baal sparks outrage from Ahab’s wife, Queen Jezebel. She threatens Elijah’s life.

That’s where we are when we get to our verses from 1 Kings today.

Various explanations for why Elijah ran have been offered. One is that Elijah was burned out. Another is that he’d given up on God.

Those are not mutually exclusive possibilities, of course.

Still another is that Elijah felt like God had given up on *him*. Which we quickly learn is not the case at all.

Given that I find some new insight into this story, a different angle to approach it from, each time I read it, it’s entirely possible that by the time this passage comes up in our readings again, I’ll have a different opinion. But today, my opinion is this:

Elijah put entirely too much pressure on himself.

He was trying to do what he thought God wanted, serve God faithfully. But despite the fact that Obadiah tells him there are 100 priests faithful to God hidden in caves, Elijah seems to think that the fate of the faithful rests solely on his shoulders.

So when his life is threatened, it only serves to increase the pressure he feels.

Elijah was human. And there’s only so much that we humans can take before we hit our breaking point. This was Elijah’s breaking point.

What I find interesting is that God does not rebuke or chastise Elijah. Jonah utters similar words after God decides to not destroy Nineveh, and God rebukes Jonah. But Elijah gets ample time to rest, he gets cake brought to him by an angel, and, a few verses later, God speaks to Elijah, and then passes by the cave Elijah hides in.

Why the difference in response?

God meets our needs in the way that is best for each of us. Not necessarily the way *we* think God should meet them, but the way that teaches us more about God and can deepen our faith.

Jonah needed the reminder that God’s concern was not solely for Jonah or the Israelites, but for *all* of creation.

Elijah needed to be reminded that it wasn’t all up to him, that there were faithful people in Israel, including those priests hiding out in caves, and that he didn’t need to bear the burden of ensuring their livelihood all by himself.

As I dwelled in this story this week, the stories about Simone Biles were still circulating. I’m clearly not Simone Biles, and I don’t know her, and I’m speculating based on what I’ve heard directly from her, but it sounds to me like she was nearing her breaking point. And she had the good sense to take a step back, rather than risk injury to her body, mind, or spirit.

When people are calling you the greatest gymnast of all time, and you’re representing your nation in front of the world, the pressure to succeed is unimaginable. Quite honestly, I wouldn’t have blamed her a bit for running as far away as she could and hiding in a cave, like Elijah did.

The pressure to meet the expectations of others can be overwhelming. Likewise, the pressure to meet the expectations we heap on ourselves can be more than we can bear.

Some of the wisest words I’ve ever been offered came as I began seminary. They came not from another pastor, or a professor, or even my bishop. They came from a dear friend, who is the daughter of a pastor, the wife of a pastor, and the mother and mother-in-law of 4 pastors.

She said, “You do not have to do everything. You’ll find yourself tempted to assume that burden. Don’t. Sometimes, it’s OK if things don’t happen. You need to learn to be OK with that.”

I think those are words we *all* need to hear throughout our lives. Other people do put a lot of pressure on us sometimes, but all too often it’s impossible to live up to the expectations we place on ourselves.

God does not call any of us to be solely responsible for the work we are called to do. Instead, God calls us to work *together*, giving each of us a different set of gifts so that ***together*** we accomplish far more than we can on our own.

The story of Elijah reminds us that God desires that we take good care of ourselves — body, mind, and spirit. That means taking time to rest. It means honoring and encouraging the well-being of others. And it means accepting help from those who accompany us on our journey, those who offer us what we need to sustain ourselves in our work. When we accept help from others, we honor the gifts *they* have been given by God, the work *they* are called to do.

God gave Elijah space and time so he could rest. God sent the angel with food. Then, and only *then,* did God lead him to the next part of his work.

So when you are weary, when you are worn down from the burden you bear, when God seems remote, take a lesson from Elijah. Take a nap. Eat some cake. Hide for a little while, if you must. But remember: You are not alone. God *is* with you. You do *not* have to do everything.

And when you are refreshed, when your body, mind, and soul have been renewed, be very choosy about which burdens you pick back up again.

1. 1 Kings 17:8-24 includes not one but 2 miracles, signs that God was with Elijah [↑](#footnote-ref-1)