

Devotion for Monday July 27, 2020
Pastor Matt Woods, Grace Lutheran Church

“When Nothing Changes No Matter How Hard I Try...”

For today I’m going to start with reading from 1 Kings 19. I would suggest you go back and read the whole chapter but for today I am going to read verse 9-18.

And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁰ He replied, “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.”

¹¹ The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

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. ¹² After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁴ He replied, “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.”

¹⁵ The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶ Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷ Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸ Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

Elijah felt beaten. Ever pour yourself into something or someone only to discover nothing has really changed? I have...many times. In the first few months of my first call I met a member named Donna. She was a thirty-something widow of a husband who was old enough to be her grandfather. Donna was certainly no beauty queen and not that smart. Yet, he was faithful to her and managed to father two children with her and left her the house. She was pretty lost without him. So, it only made sense that she had a live-in boyfriend when I met them. By the time I came along her kids were 10 and 8 and the house was pretty run down. I figured if I could get them a little help this would jump start them back to a financial stability.

In the next three months much of my energy went toward helping her and her kids. We cleaned up her yard, got her some resources, fixed whatever seemed broken, helped with groceries. We even called in favors and helped her live-in boyfriend get a job. I even drove him to work each morning—got him a lunch. I was mentally and emotionally all in. I was determined to love this family with all of me.

The job lasted only four days—each day with a new excuse why he couldn’t work the whole shift. When I found out he quit the job I confronted him. He was polite, grateful, and respectful but what he said to me I’ve never forgotten. “Pastor, I really don’t want any of that. That’s not for me.” I was shocked. I was crushed. “How can you not want to escape the way you are living?!” I had been very zealous but he didn’t want to work or change the way things

were. Sadly, Donna didn't want to risk losing him so things ultimately never changed. They continued to live in poverty getting help from us when they got real desperate. Since then I have helped some others to the same degree most of the time with the same results.

This is Elijah. He had poured himself out for the Lord. He believed that beating Ahab's false prophets would surely bring the king to repentance. It didn't. "So, why keep working so hard for little or no results? Isn't that how the devil whispers in our ear?"

In Chapter 18 Elijah had a great win over the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel on their home turf in the battle of the two sacrifices. Elijah thought that would be decisive. The King and a large group of Israelites witnessed how God sent fire down to devour the water-logged sacrifice, the rocks, the dirt and all the water in the trench around the sacrifice. The crowd that witnessed the whole thing bowed down and cried out, "The Lord—He is our God!" And then they helped kill the prophets of Baal. King Ahab was among the witnesses. Elijah was so confident in that victory that he ran empowered in the Spirit in front of Ahab's chariot all the way back to the palace-- I guess expecting repentance, something to change. Instead Elijah was met with more anger and determination from Queen Jezebel to kill Elijah in her hatred for the prophet and for the Lord. And so, verse 3 tells us Elijah ran for his life in fear probably thinking, "What in God's name am I actually accomplishing?!" And so, with a mixture of fear, deep disappointment, and frustration, Elijah ends up in a conversation with the Lord at the mouth of a cave.

If you have stood next to Elijah, (metaphorically speaking) then please consider what comes next. The Lord is very patient with Elijah. If anyone has been working hard to save humanity it is the Lord. And yet at His cross Jerusalem turned on the Lord and crucified Him with the same venom that their forefathers poured out on the prophets they killed. The Lord is patient with us.

He understands that sometimes we just need to step back. Twice God asks, "What are you doing here Elijah?" (19:9, 19:13). Remember Elijah ran, afraid for his life but under the broom tree he prays to God just to take his life. "Elijah, what are you actually doing here?" I'll bet Elijah came to that broom tree the same way many have, not sure why we are here, but we are emotionally spent, and at our wits end. We need a reboot of some kind.

And why not? Rest was integrated into creation—The first full day humanity in Genesis 1 was spent hanging out with the Lord. The Sabbath (Literally seventh for the seventh day of creation) was created for a day to be refreshed in the Lord. When we don't get rest we become like Elijah, spiritually burned out. Sometimes we just need to step back from the people (family members or not) that are so resistant to us. And sometimes that means someone else may have to help them instead of us. In 1 Kings 20:13 God sends another prophet to Ahab to carry the message. In truth, someone else may relate better to those we desperately want to love and save than we can. A family member or a friend may just tune us out while someone else may be in a better position to tune in. Pray for that and remember we are just the prophet not the Savior.

Forty days of hanging out with the Lord at the luxurious Mt. Sinai cave in the desert refreshes his Elijah's spirit. Then God speaks and gives us the second element to remember.

What does God tell Elijah? Elijah still serves the living God and He's Got this. He is still at work even when what we are doing isn't working. "So, go back Elijah the way you came. Anoint Hazael, Elisha, and Jehu—two kings and prophet. Under them none of your enemies will escape, not even Jezebel. And take note, I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." Your work is not in vain and you are far from being alone. The Lord redirects Elijah to the faithful.

Hanging out with the faithful will continue to refresh Elijah. Not only so but God is preparing for Elijah's retirement by anointing Elisha who will replace Elijah. It is possible that even Elijah does not fully bounce back from this with the same energy he had at Mt. Carmel. But that's a discussion for another devotion perhaps.

Just turn on the news however, and one may wonder "Is the church doing any good?" "Lord, your people ignore Your Word. Some have seemingly lost their minds and are burning down their own neighborhoods. Some have died unjustly. Authority seems to be broken. And Covid just seems to linger—more than linger—cause serious trouble to people's health, to jeopardize people's livelihoods, and no one knows for sure what we are actually supposed to do with our schools. We have been trying Lord, really trying to be faithful and consistent but nothing seems to be getting better!" Like Elijah we may not stop any of these things. We are not called to necessarily. We are called to be faithful. Sometimes faithfulness is the best we can offer. However, faithfulness is all the Lord is asking of us. "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev 2:10).

Most important the Lord is still active as much in our day as it was in Noah's day, or Martin Luther's Day. The world seemed to be going to hell in a hand basket but the Lord was moving in the hearts of humble people who God reserved to carry on God's plan. The followers of Jesus probably felt hopeless on Good Friday. But even dead Jesus was doing something for His people. The point is this: Even when Elijah seems to be failing he wasn't because He was very faithful. Even when failure is all his actions seemed to produce it didn't. Elijah was the message to 7000 people, those like Elisha and Jehu, who's knees had not bowed down to idols. Elijah's boldness, and faithfulness, and the news from Mt. Carmel would no doubt inspire them just the same. God is still working even when the world is falling apart. Keep in mind that the world will be at its worst when Jesus returns. Even now in heaven Jesus is still working for us. So hang in there and hold on. Pray to the Lord. Maybe take a break. But don't give up. Your Lord hasn't.

And Now the Lord bless you and Keep you. The Lord make His face to shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with his favor and give you His peace. Amen.

Pastor Matthew Woods
John 3:30