

REFRESHING ADVICE

I Kings 19:4-12

Some think of the Bible as an escape from reality. In fact it is a book of often painful truth. The Bible tells us that Abraham, the father of Israel, was a liar. His son Jacob was a thief. Moses, the great law giver, had a murderous temper. The greatest leader of Israel, King David was an adulterer. Now we learn about the human failings of one of the greatest prophets of Israel, Elijah.

To briefly recount the background of the story leading up to the events in today's reading, three years before, 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 Baals which had been instigated by the wicked Queen Jezebel. It came to a head when a contest was arranged on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal to determine who the true God of Israel was. Each would build an altar for their god and then a sacrifice would be made. The god who answered by fire, consuming the sacrifice, would be considered the winner.

All day long the prophets of Baal danced and prayed, sang and prayed, whined and prayed, all without result. At the end of the day, Elijah prayed and God answered by fire. The prophets of the Baals had been exterminated, the rains had begun again, but Elijah was haunted by the threat of retribution from Queen Jezebel. He went out into the wilderness, away from all human contact, slumped down under a tree and said, "All right, Lord, enough. Why should I bother? Just kill me now and get it over with." We pick up the story with his flight from danger. Hear now the reading of the Old Testament lesson.

No one had performed a more spectacular feat than Elijah, bringing down fire from the heavens, then bringing destruction on the 400 prophets of Baal. He had won the contest against them – out-numbered 400 to one. And he won the hearts of the people.

But the wicked queen, Jezebel, heard what he had done and she, being a worshipper of Baal, swore to kill Elijah. Now it was not at all certain that Jezebel would really have fooled around with someone who had shown such a great display of power, and had such great public support. But what is certain is that Elijah believed she would do so and he lost his nerve.

After winning the contest against the prophets of Baal, perhaps Elijah thought the crowds would flock around him and probably some did. But maybe it is like social reformers who find that closing the bar that serves minors and the local porn store may be applauded but a lot of people are not going to be happy. Baal, after all, was their fertility god who was their excuse for extramarital sexual activity, so while Elijah may have been publicly applauded, he was not completely appreciated, especially by the King's wife.

It seems likely that Elijah had trouble with his sudden success and popularity. Success can bring fame and notoriety but it does not guarantee future success or happiness. In Elijah's case fame and success came with a death threat, which is also not unusual. He had danger without and doubts within, a bad combination. Though it was God who destroyed the prophets of Baal and brought victory Elijah it was angry at God.

So he ran away threw himself a pity party. This is understandable. The most powerful person in the country wanted him dead. But self-pity, as understandable as it is, is seldom helpful. We tend to feel sorry for ourselves when we receive criticism we believe is unwarned, and self-pity magnifies whatever problems we think we have. Elijah was no longer motivated by his love for God but motivated by his fear of Jezebel, not how he could help God but how he could be hurt.

In today's language we might say he was suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. He had been at war with the prophets of Baal. He won the battle. They died. He lived. But for him the war was not over. The Queen wanted him dead. So very quickly Elijah went from the heights to the depths, from victory to anxiety. Even the greatest of God's servants are prone to depression, and when we poor souls fall victim to such depression, we are in the company of Elijah, that great prophet of Israel.

What we learn is that when stress builds Elijah isolated himself. He traveled alone leaving his servant behind. Quiet time alone is one thing. Pushing away those who are your help and support is quite another. But when depressed that is often what people do – go off in seclusion. That is why Elijah spoke so much of "I" and not much "we." That is noted when he said, "I am alone," even while talking with his companion God.

In fear Elijah fled to Beersheba, the limit of the cultivated land, where the desert begins. There he sat under a broom tree, which really is not a tree but a bush, which can grow as high as ten feet, with delicate white flowers with maroon centers. Under such lovely foliage sat Elijah, this once mighty warrior, failing to take time to smell the flowers.

He sat there wishing for his life to end. He did not try to take his life. He asked God to do that. As far as he was concerned his life was already over. Elijah had fled to the end of the land and saw no way he could survive the threat of Jezebel. Sometimes people have thoughts of suicide as a way of punishing other people. Ezekiel was angry at God and the people of Israel. His death, he may have thought, would punish them. Maybe he thought he deserved death. No matter how illogical it may seem, sometimes we just convince ourselves there is no life left.

There was once a man who was convinced he was dead. His family took him to a psychiatrist who tried to talk him out of this notion. The doctor asked, "Do dead men talk?" The man answered, "Maybe they do. Houdini had a telephone put in his coffin so, yes, dead men do talk." Then the doctor asked, "Do dead men eat?" "Maybe they do. In Oriental cultures food is placed on tombs so the dead can come back and eat, so apparently dead people do eat."

Then the doctor asked, "Do dead men bleed?" The man said, "No, absolutely not. Dead people do not bleed." The doctor took a scalpel and made a small incision on the man's finger. The man looked at the blood and said, "Well what do you know? Dead men do bleed." Sometimes we are like that man and like Elijah just not believing there is any more life left in us. We are just a hollow form.

But what Elijah learned is that we can run from others and from our self but we cannot hide from God. To this despairing prophet the first thing God did was to get him to sleep and eat. When he had some sleep and ate, God had him sleep some more. His restoration all started with good rest and good food. Then God had Elijah arise and go on a journey. He was not going to find what course of life God set before him by just sitting there nibbling on cake. Part of the deliverance from depression is getting our body moving. This is good advice from the angel to the exhausted and depressed Elijah – eat well, rest well, get moving and it will prepare you for what God has in store.

There are a lot of dumb questions you can ask someone who is depressed, questions like, “What’s wrong with you?” or “Why don’t you just snap out of it?” In the story of Elijah we find good questions to ask which are essential to being truly refreshed. The first question is: “Are you getting enough sleep?” “Are you making your place of sleep conducive to relaxation and comfort?” The second good question is: “Are you getting good food to eat?”

We have learned something about so-called comfort food – stuff laden with sugar and fat and calories and chemicals that makes us feel good temporarily but really gives no nutrition while increasing the dangerous conditions associated with obesity and diabetes and heart disease. Those “cakes” given Elijah did not have bleached flour or chemical preservatives or sugary frosting. It was more like an all natural English muffin.

Are you getting enough sleep and eating well and finally we should ask: “Are you getting good exercise?” God sent Elijah on a journey of 40 days. Forty is the number of days of the great flood, the number of years the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness, and the number of days Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. The number symbolizes an important period of time on the journey. Along with sleep and food God had Elijah get some exercise. He went with the rest and food and strength God supplied.

Where he went when he regained his strength is significant. Mt. Horeb was the place where Moses first met God in the burning bush. It was also known as Sinai, the place where God gave the Law. A trip to that holy mountain was a pilgrimage to his spiritual roots, a place to recall all God had done throughout history. The mountain was a setting that would force Elijah to think about something other than him self.

But the story does not end with Elijah getting rest and food and exercise and a trip to church. And it was not over with a “happily ever after” conclusion. When he got to the mountain Elijah again started to grumble. To his words of complaint God sent a few things to get his attention: an earthquake, a mighty wind, and fire. Once he got Elijah’s attention then he spoke in a still small voice of calm, a sound of sheer silence.

God, who once spoke by fire that consumed a water soaked altar sacrifice, does not always reveal himself in powerful, spectacular ways. Some people

think that the only place to find God is in something big – the biggest church or the biggest choir. God is found in there too. But God spoke to Elijah in a still small voice, a sound of sheer silence.

Still Elijah complained that all his problems were someone else's fault and he deserved better after all the good he did for God and the nation and he just was not up to the challenge. Some of us know that name of Lou Holtz is a football coach who in every place that he has coached has taken the football program and turned it around. He built Arkansas into one of the major football powers in the nation. He was turning the program around at Minnesota when he was offered the position at Notre Dame.

Notre Dame's football program had been struggling for several years and Lou Holtz was hired to restore the "Fighting Irish" to their winning tradition. But the turn-around was not immediate. They lost several games by only a few points and Lou Holtz was left feeling miserable over the defeats. One day, a reporter asked him, "Coach Holtz, how do you feel about all the problems your team is facing?" Lou Holtz was quiet for a moment and then he said, "I know God doesn't send us more trouble than we can handle, but sometimes I think he overestimates my ability!"

But God was not going to let his prophet go with an alibi. God was not going to let him end his life in isolation. God reminded Elijah that there continued to be a faithful remnant that followed God and when he stopped feeling sorry for himself he needed to get back to working with the faithful remnant and back to doing the work God placed in front of him.

At the moment he was alone, but he was no longer lonely. He slept and ate and slept some more. He got exercise – lots of it. He had the strength with which he was supplied by God. He was given purpose and a mission to go on. And he was reunited with the faithful people of his time. All these revived his faith that God, who had fed and led Israel from slavery to the wilderness, from the wilderness to the land of promise, could lead him into the new time before him, and in the strength which God supplies, a faith to restore him as well. So when angels show up in whatever form offering rest and food, exercise and engagement, accept the help as a gift from God. And whether the voice of God is in an earthquake, wind and fire or the still small voice of calm, be still and listen.

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