

“Breaking up the Pity Party”
1 Kings 19:1-18
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There may not be many prophets we can identify with, but we can identify with the prophet Elijah, at least at this point in his life. As we pick up the story in 1 Kings 19, he has just defeated the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, not only proving that Yahweh is the one true God, but sending these false prophets to their death. But before anyone has time to throw him a victory party complete with parade, Jezebel threatens his life for having killed her prophets, saying he will die within a day. And so, Elijah runs away in fear to Beersheba in Judah where, technically speaking, Jezebel has no authority.

We know the name Jezebel and remember that it is not a name we want to give our daughter even if we can't remember why. I once made this comment to a Sunday School class in another setting and one woman said, while keeping a straight face, “But we named our daughter Jezebel.” I had a sinking feeling in my gut until she started smiling. She was kidding and she got me. I have not seen any Jezebels on our rolls...

Jezebel is the wife of Ahab, king of Israel; and the daughter of Ethbaal, king of Sidon; part of why the author of 1 Kings says Ahab did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him (1 Kings 16:30). Jezebel leads Ahab astray, leads him to worship Baal, though we ought not let him off the hook, any more than we should let Adam off the hook and blame Eve. Ahab is either willingly complicit or profoundly lacking in courage, but either way Jezebel is a piece of work.

After her prophets lose, she goes after Elijah. Some versions of the text add to her threat that he will die the phrase – if you are Elijah, I am Jezebel. It sounds like something a five-year-old might say, but she is neither the first nor the last national leader to use childish bully language. “You think you’re big stuff, but I’m bigger!” she says and she has the authority to do some damage, though Elijah has just called down fire from the heavens. Is there anyone of whom he should be afraid?

Well, apparently, he is afraid of her. So, he runs to a different nation seeking shelter, refuge, sanctuary. Not only that, he wishes for his death. It may seem odd that in order to escape a death threat, he wishes for death, but once fear takes control, we don't think clearly. Maybe he wants to avoid a more painful death. So, as he sits under a solitary broom tree, with its delicate white flowers with maroon centers, Elijah offers up this odd petition, "It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

He is giving up completely, he is throwing in the towel, he is having a full-blown pity party. "Poor me," he is saying, "I've been faithful, but now I'm going to die. Go ahead and take me!" Later in his conversation with God, he adds that he is all alone. He is the only one left in all of Israel who is faithful. It's over. All hope is lost.

Consumed by fear and feeling all alone, he has a full-blown pity party. And to be fair, Jezebel poses a legitimate threat, but the situation is nowhere near as hopeless as the prophet assumes in this moment.

Yet we can identify with him in many different ways. Those of us in ministry are sometimes moved to a sense of desperation, feeling like we have done all we can and accomplished nothing, feeling like we are all alone with our burdens of responsibility. Many in the church today feel a sense of desperation about this institution we love; feel like nothing is working; feel like the harder we work, the more ground we lose. Many feel a sense of desperation about national life right now. Whether we are in favor of the radical changes of the past few years or passionately opposed to them, these are unsettling times.

Even in our families and places of work, we can have these feelings. No matter how many children there are, one child ends up taking care of aging parents. There may be a team of people in any work setting, but one person often carries a heavier load. So, we work ourselves to exhaustion and end up in frustration; we feel like throwing in the towel and have ourselves a pity party. And again, to be fair, our struggles may be real. It's just that pushed into a corner by fear or exhaustion or both, we tend to exaggerate and catastrophize. We limit our options and resources. We feel hopeless, isolated and alone.

This is why periods of respite and regular vacations are important. We get to take a break from care, work and routine. We get to rest – physically, emotionally and spiritually. And we gain a bit of perspective on the challenges we face, some of which cease to be challenges at all and many of which become quite manageable.

I'm thankful for the time we've just had away and feel far less cranky than I did when I left. It is a relative thing... But without some perspective, we tend to develop what a mentor of mine called the Mervin Martyr Syndrome. We do too much, we refuse to accept any help or take time to rest, and then we complain that we are doing too much. So, like Elijah, we have a pity party.

But something happens to break up Elijah's pity party. Or to be more precise, Someone happens. God happens. God first sends an angel who brings Elijah food. If this guy is going to live, his hunger strike needs to end. "Get up and eat," the angel says, and suddenly Elijah sees a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water.

The food and drink remind us of a previous story wherein Elijah visits a widow in Zarephath and finds sustenance during a drought (1 Kings 17). The word for jar, an usual word, *sapphat*, is used in both stories. The term for hot stones or coals *resapim*, also unusual, is the same term used for the coal that touches Isaiah's lips to purify him (Isaiah 6:6). So, every term is chosen carefully to locate this story in the context of a larger story of human need and Divine provision.

Seeing the food and taking in the meaning, Elijah eats and then lies down again. The angel tells him to get up and eat more. He will need all of his strength for the journey ahead. So, he eats and then travels forty days and nights to Mount Horeb and spends the night in a cave. Again, the terms are chosen carefully. This seems to be the same cave Moses is sheltered in when the glory of Lord passes by in Exodus 33:22. The informed reader will wonder if God is about to show up again.

And indeed, God does show up. God first sends an angel. Now God shows up in person, asking what Elijah is doing here. It is a question not of why Elijah is in a cave at Mount Horeb, but why he is so downcast. "I've been zealous for you," he says, "but all of your people

have forsaken you. They've killed all the other prophets. I am the only faithful person left and now they are trying to kill me."

At this point, God tells Elijah to go and stand on the mountain. For God is about to pass by him. We know this part of the story. There is a great wind, there is an earthquake and then a fire. But God is not in any of these spectacular events. Finally, there is what the NRSV translates as sheer silence. Other translations render this as a still small voice, a gentle breeze or a voice of a light whisper. In this ordinary quiet experience Elijah finally senses God's presence and hears God's voice, asking again why he is here. He repeats his answer and then God speaks a word that breaks up Elijah's pity party for good.

There is a message here about how God speaks to us most often - not through miraculous events, but through ordinary experiences; not in loud external ways, but through quiet inner voices. So, we need to learn how to listen for God's voice. As Michel Quoist says in his book *Prayers*, if we knew how to listen, we would hear God speaking, because God does speak through the Gospels and through life, that new Gospel to which we add a page every day. But rarely do we hear God, Quoist says, because our faith is too weak and our life too earthbound.

So, there is a general message about how God speaks to us, but the specific message for Elijah is a word of redirection that breaks up his pity party and it has two parts. The first part is that Elijah is to go back to work. It is not time to throw in the towel. There are people to anoint, leaders to get in place, a transition for which to plan. The second part is that Elijah is not alone. He says he is the only faithful follower left. In fact, God says, almost dismissively, there are 7,000 Israelites who have not bowed to Baal. 7,000! That's a lot more than 1!

It is an interesting combination of provocation and encouragement. God does not coddle the prophet and say, "Poor Elijah, I know, they're mean to me sometimes too." Rather, God tells him to get up, dust himself off and get back to work. It's tough love, but the same kind of response we might give to a young child who has fallen but not hurt him/herself. "Get up," we say, because making a big deal over the fall would evoke an unnecessary sense of panic. But after offering this word of tough love, God assures Elijah that he is not alone, nowhere near

alone. It is a corrective word for Elijah's accounting of the faithful, but it is mostly an encouraging word to help the prophet move past his fear. He is not the last defender of a dying faith.

Both parts of this message of redirection are instructive for us when we get bogged down in a pity party. First, there are times when getting back to work is the best way to overcome our discouragement. Often we want someone to coddle us, to understand our misery, to sympathize with us; and there is a place for understanding and kindness. But sometimes what we really need, what will help us get to a better place is not to be encouraged to continue feeling sorry for ourselves, but to find our way into habits of being that make for a better life.

If we are grieving, counseling and support groups create space for us to express our deep sadness, but at some point, losing ourselves in service to others may pave the way to healing. Service provides meaning and purpose, fulfillment and joy.

I think of how my grandmother responded when my grandfather died of cancer in 1970. She talked about him with great sadness, said she had no reason to continue living, told stories about his illness, some of which were accurate, and I thought - this is how she will heal, by expressing her sadness. And it helped some. But twenty years later, she expressed all of these feelings in exactly the same way. She never moved on, she never healed in this way. Her saving grace was that she owned a Merle Norman store in downtown Lincoln. She threw herself into it and it thrived. Getting back to work, having something meaningful to do, to fill her life, kept her going. So it often goes for us.

In like manner, if we are discouraged about the church, expressing frustration may help, but doing something in the way of faithful service is far more fulfilling. We may not be able to address every issue challenging the church in this time, but we can visit the sick and homebound; we can clothe the needy and feed the hungry; we can welcome the stranger; we can offer compassion to the addicted and broken and rejected, as well as a word about the kind of intimacy with Christ that leads to a whole and healthy life - and in the process break out of our pity party. Even in our discouragement with national life, the

best path to healing and hope is to get involved, not give up, do what we can to make a difference.

But while getting back to work can break up our pity party, it helps to claim the second part of Elijah's message, that we are never alone. Not only is God with us; so are many other people. Part of why this knowledge helps us is that some things cannot be accomplished alone.

I think of the story about the people who rescued nine swimmers caught in a rip current in July, 2017, at Panama City Beach, Florida. Thinking about how ants will form a chain to help a wounded ant, one man convinced at first five people to form a human chain which grew to at least forty people, and together they worked to rescue the nine stranded swimmers without any of them getting into trouble. Some things cannot be done alone. They require community.

But the truth is simply the awareness that others are with us helps in and of itself. One is the loneliest number, as an old song says. Isolation can be soul-draining while community gives us hope.

There is a scene in the film *The Two Towers*, the second in a trilogy of films based on J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings*, in which there seems to be little hope. The people have gathered together for safety at Helm's Deep, but the forces of evil are coming and there are far too many of them. Then, there is a horn signaling the arrival of unexpected guests and they are allowed through the gate.

It is the elves. Haldir, their leader, says, "I bring word from Elrond of Rivendell. An alliance once existed between elves and men. Long ago we fought and died together. We've come to honor that allegiance." "Welcome Haldir," says Aragorn, in great relief, "You are most welcome." They may still be outnumbered, but they are no longer alone. And so, they have hope. Knowing that we are not alone makes a difference. No matter what challenges we face, we have a community of faithful friends here in this church who are with us.

The fact that Elijah gets discouraged doesn't damage his legacy. It endears him to us because we all get discouraged. And the larger story offers us hope as it tells us that God will show up and break up our pity party – calling us to service and offering us companions for the journey.