

1 Kings 19:1–16 (NRSV)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

## Day by Day; Generation by Generation

A Sermon by Dudley. C. Rose preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: June 19, 2016      Text: 1 Kings 19:1-16

When last we saw Elijah he was with the widow of Zarephath. [Slide 1] Through Elijah God had worked a miracle. In the midst of drought and famine the widow's supply of flour and oil was endlessly renewed. It got even better. When the widow's son died, Elijah revived him. In the heart of Jezebel's idolatrous homeland Elijah has proven himself to be a man of God. Last we saw Elijah, he was basking in the light of these miracles.

After that, things got still better for him. Jezebel and Ahab wanted to murder Elijah, and yet Elijah walked right into the king's court in Jezreel [Slide 2] and challenged the royal family's favored, prophets of Baal and Asherah, to a duel. Everyone repaired to the top of Mt. Carmel, [Slide 3] a steep ridge that looks over the Jezreel Valley and the Kishon River to the northeast. As we learned last time, the altars were prepared with wood and a bull. The prophets of Baal and Asherah, 850 in all, paraded and ultimately limped around their altar pleading with Baal and Asherah to ignite the logs. Finally, after a full day of trying and exhausted, they dropped to the ground in defeat. Then came Elijah's turn. To make things even more interesting, Elijah had his altar thoroughly soaked with water. At Elijah's command the fire of the Lord leapt onto the wet altar, and it burst into flames.

As if that weren't enough, Elijah had the failed prophets seized, and he brought them down to the Kishon River, and killed every one of them there. This statue on Mt. Carmel memorializes Elijah's brutal victory. [Slide 4]

We now come to today's text. Ahab was impressed with Elijah's work. The text says that Ahab "told Jezebel all that Elijah had done" a phrase the Bible uses to describe miraculous power. Ahab "told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword." But Jezebel was less than impressed, or pleased. She promised to kill Elijah by the next day. Elijah fled for his life to Beersheba [Slide 5], where he left his servant and then kept going south, a day's journey further, into the wilderness. It's fair to say that Elijah was confused. He had put on fabulous demonstrations of God's power. He had even impressed the king. But now he was fleeing for his life. Elijah told God he might as well die, and then the worn-out prophet falls asleep. An angel appears and gives him food and water. The angel says he'll need it for what lies ahead. The angel was right of course. On awakening Elijah runs another 40 more days south, off the map, [Slide 6] to the desolate location of Mt. Horeb, where Moses received the Ten Commandments.

Elijah is all alone in the blistering Judean wilderness, [Slide 7] in one of the many caves cut into the sandstone that dot the rugged terrain. God says, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah expresses his confusion again, "[The] Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

Then comes the part many of us remember from way back in Sunday school. The Lord essentially tells Elijah not to worry. He tells Elijah to go out on the mountain and the Lord is going to pass by. Elijah moves to the mouth of his cave. Sure enough, there comes a wind so strong that it splits the mountains and breaks the stones into pieces. After the wind a rumbling earthquake. And then a searing fire. Each time Elijah is sure this is where God is speaking. He

has good reason. His experience with the widow of Zarephath, with providing her the endless supply of oil and flour, of raising her son from the dead; Elijah has experience of God's amazing power. His experience with the failure of the false prophets and then of his commanding a fire to engulf his drenched altar on Mt Carmel and it bursting into flames; Oh yes, Elijah has experience of God's amazing power. Maybe he had begun to doubt it while he was on the run. But now it's back. God has invited him out onto the mountain to see for himself. And God's power is displayed in the wind, the earthquake and the fire. Except that it isn't. God isn't in any of these powerful displays. Elijah stands utterly confused.

And then comes God. God is present in what the King James Version called a still, small voice. The NRSV translates it as the sound of sheer silence, which is a pretty literal rendering. But translators have struggled for centuries to capture the meaning of the paradoxical phrase. It's something like a whisper. Whatever it is, it stands in contrast to the rumble of the wind, earthquake and fire. But it is something. Elijah hears something. He comes out of the cave. God repeats the question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" But Elijah is still confused. He repeats his answer, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

God's response takes no notice of Elijah's moaning. God just tells Elijah, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus."

Someone once said that life is about 95% just showing up. I suspect that's not the good news many of us would like to hear about life. Like Elijah, many of us may like the big, meaningful moments: the miracle, the victory, the big thing that solves the problem. Elijah wanted to believe that when Ahab and Jezebel saw a couple of flashy displays, they would change their ways and Israel would be restored to its proper self.

Instead God took Elijah to the mouth of a cave in a desolate wilderness of rough, jagged rocks as far as the eye could see, and God as much as pointed over the endless heaving landscape and said, "Elijah, it's all in the walk." Can't you almost see God laughing, or at least smiling? [Slide 8] Here's Elijah down off the map in Sinai and God tells him, "Go. Return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." That is, go from this wilderness you're in, the one you have fled to; go through the wilderness I'm pointing to; and guess what, keep going, right past where you were born, keep going north to another wilderness, way up in Damascus. Elijah might well have asked, "What's the point?" which I suppose is what he meant when he complained, "The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." What's the point?

[Placeholder Slide]

People, like you, know the answer, I think. Think about it. You have all have enough unfulfilled wishes of one sort or another. You've wished for a cure that doesn't come; for an end to violence; for an end to social ills; for justice like an ever flowing stream; Lord, you've for bodies that don't betray you. I cannot count the things that I have wished were different, and neither can you. Maybe it's not too much to say that you, that we, are like Elijah. Maybe we've had a few momentous victories here and there, but a lot of the time, most of the time, it's just putting one step in front of another, often enough backing up, even retracing our steps.

But unlike Elijah, you know there's a lot more to it than that, don't you? You don't gripe about the state of things. Oh, maybe a little; I do at least. But you do something else. Whoever said that 95% is just showing up didn't get it quite right, or maybe it was meant ironically. You see, you do a lot more than just show up. Elijah doesn't seem to quite get God's point. But you

do. You have a sense that this work you do when you show up makes a difference, even when the difference is hard to see.

I cannot begin to count the many ways in which you show up and take up the ministry of Jesus in this place. And most of the time it's not very flashy. Sometimes it's hard, like hiking in the Judean wilderness. But you, and people of faith, people in communities of faith everywhere, have faith that all the caring, love and service you do means something. And so you do it day by day, generation after generation. To borrow a couple of phrases, you understand that God is still speaking to you, and you understand that God is urging on in this life full of joy and trouble. You understand that your walk through the valley of the shadow of death, or beside the still waters, is sacred work.

For the past 35 years, 33 as your senior minister, I have had the privilege to walk with you, with this community of faith. It has been day upon day, almost 13,000 of them. It has been half my life. It has been worship service after worship service, maybe 1,500 sermons. And it has been generation upon generation. In some cases I have baptized you and then your children, also. And if I have learned anything over this journey, it is that people of faith, you, have the most extraordinary capacity to hang in there, to care, to build up a community, often enough in the face of daunting odds or strong headwinds or rough terrain. As our opening hymn says it, you are salt for the earth, O people, salt for the reign of God.

It has been the most marvelous odyssey. You mean the world to me. You have given me love and kindness more than I deserve. I don't know if Elijah was prepared to leave his work when God told him to go and anoint Elisha as his successor. I suppose not entirely. But I do know this. This is an extraordinary congregation. A long time ago we began together, when Peter Ives passed the pastoral role on to me. And now we are here, where it is to be passed on yet again, to Tom Hathaway. And I know this. I know that you and Tom will continue this inherited sojourn, inherited not so much from me as from a long line of forebears, both ministers and congregants, who have faithfully put one foot in front of another believing it was good and right so to do. Unlike Elijah, you have a satisfactory and demonstrated answer to God's question. "What are you doing here, Elijah," God asked. Elijah could only complain. But you, salt for the earth, O people, can answer, "We are a blessed and pilgrim people, bound for the reign of God; bound for the reign of God one step at a time, day after day, generation after generation." May God bless you and keep you as you go. Amen.