

Monarchy: 1 Samuel to 2 Kings
1 Kings 19:1-18
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I invite you to reach for your Bible, either the one we've made available for you or the one you brought with you, and turn with me to the book of First Kings. We are in a series of messages in which we are looking at the broad, overarching narrative of the Bible. And it is in this book that we meet the God who created and ordered the cosmos, the God who loves and meets us in the routines of life, and one who—as we see in the inspired pages of this book—is in the process of recreating, and reforming, and reminding people that God's not done with us yet, even when we're discouraged.

Today, we meet a man named Elijah, a great prophet to God's people who is discouraged. Elijah won a huge victory with God over the prophets of Baal. But no sooner than Elijah begins to celebrate, does he get word that the evil queen Jezebel says, "By this time tomorrow, Elijah, you'll be dead." In Elijah's discouragement, God comes to him with a question, and here's a preview: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It's a question for all of us when we get discouraged. What are you doing here?

So I invite you to stand with me out of respect and honor for God's Word as we look together at 1 Kings 19 verses 1-18. And when I'm done, I'll say, "This is the word of the Lord," so that if you believe it you can respond by saying, "Thanks be to God." Listen carefully; we're reading God's holy Word.

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had slain 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 as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." Then he was afraid, and he arose and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a broom tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the Lord came again a second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you." And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the

sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. And may the same Holy Spirit that inspired the writing and preservation of these words, now inspire them in our hearing as well. Amen, and you can be seated.

There’s an old story that preachers tell about how the Devil was having a yard sale one day and he was putting all of his tools up for sale. On that date, the tools were laid out. They had prices marked on them for public inspection, and there were a lot of treacherous instruments: hatred, envy, jealousy, deceit, pride, lying, and so on. Laid apart from the rest of the Devil's tools was a tool that was worn more than any of the others and was priced very high. "What's the name of this tool?" asked one of the customers.

"That," the Devil replied, "is discouragement."

"Why have you priced it so high?"

"Because discouragement is more useful to me than all the others. I can pry open and get inside a man's heart with that when I cannot get near him with any other tools. It's badly worn because I use it on almost everyone, since so few people know it belongs to me."

Discouragement is a powerful tool, so the question is, when you get discouraged, where do you go? What do you do?

In my office, I have a picture of that famous saying from WWII Britain, the one that conjures images of that stiff upper lip resolve of the Brits. When you get discouraged, do you “keep calm and carry on”? Or do you relate more to the American slogan from the Cold War of “duck and cover”? For Elijah, neither works. After his episode on Mt Carmel where God revealed his power, in decisive fashion, Elijah was probably thinking to himself: “This is great. Now we’re going to be able to come in and reform and restore Israel to YHWH, we’re going to get back on track and all will be well from here.” But in fact, just the opposite happens. Elijah goes from number one to man on the run.

You see in the face of Elijah’s discouragement, the text tells us that Elijah flees out into the wilderness and finds a broom tree to sit under. Elijah’s not thinking to himself, “Keep calm and carry on.” No, he’s thinking to himself, “Lie down and die.” Psychologists tell us that depression like Elijah’s does not necessarily make logical sense. This frazzled and overwhelmed prophet doesn’t see the incredible victories in his past; all he can see is the bad news right in front of him.

We can relate to this right? There is so much bad news in the world – you know, political, economic, religious – I don’t even turn the television on in the morning anymore because I when I do, I’m already discouraged before I’ve even finished my breakfast. There’s bad news that comes to our personal lives, as well: the results came in from the pathologist and the test result is positive, or the phone call from a relative telling you their marriage is over, or the bill that comes in the mail that says everything you’ve been working for is about to be swallowed up in debt.

But there's another message here for Elijah, there's a messenger who comes to him in verse 5. Verse 5 says, "Behold, an angel touched him and said to him get up and eat, and there was a cake baked on hot stones and a jug of water." This is proof that when we're bummed out, the best thing for us to do is eat. That's right, all of you who are like me and go on benders when you're blue, eating everything in sight, the Bible says it's ok.

But more importantly, in the midst of Elijah's bad news, an angel messenger comes to him and says this bad news is not the last word. Often times in life, bad news and good news come to us side by side. And what we need to decide is which message we will believe. You see, God always has good news in the midst of our struggles. There is always hope to be found in Jesus Christ. And notice how God doesn't come to Elijah and say, "My followers never get discouraged." No, he comes along with gentleness, with the caring bedside manner of one of our budding nursing students. In the midst of bad news, there is always good news to be found with Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah 29:11 says, "Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

In 1996, there was a young Panamanian Pitching prospect who played for the New York Yankees, and in his first few starts for the pin stripes, he went out and was blown out of the water losing 10-2 and 13-0, and they couldn't understand what was going on. Here was a pitcher who had all the right stuff, the right velocity, the right mechanics, the right attitude. But still, other teams were all over his stuff. He had this fastball that would do this squiggly thing right when it got to the plate. Joe Torre didn't know what to do with it; the front office even began to talk of trading him. But this young man didn't lose hope. You see, he had just met Jesus Christ, and now instead of getting discouraged and letting this derail him, he just said, "Let's go with it." So he started throwing this pitch over and over again, and this pitch became the greatest cut fastball in the history of the game, and he became the greatest closer in the history of baseball. This pitcher, as you may already have guessed, is Mariano Rivera. And this pitch is so fast and it moves so dramatically that it became known as the buzzsaw. In the playoffs one year, Rivera broke one batter's bat three times in the same at bat.

Out of Rivera's failure and his bad news that all of his other pitches weren't working came good news. Rivera would never have to throw another pitch; it was always cut fastballs. And in the midst of Elijah's discouragement, God comes to him and says get up and go to Mt Horeb, the mountain of God. And there, God asks this question to Elijah. Notice that God doesn't ask Elijah, "What were you doing there under the broom tree?" No, he says to Elijah, "What are you doing here?" God's using some good Socratic method to teach Elijah a lesson: What are you doing here? What is the meaning of this mountain Elijah?

I think this passage gets misinterpreted. People think that it's all about hearing the "still small voice of God," saying, "There, there it's all right. Just cuddle up and be all warm and fuzzy." That's not what it's about at all. You see, Elijah wants out of the prophet biz, he doesn't want to hear any still small voices, he's done with it. But the crux of this passage is in the question. From the cave in the Mountain, God says, "Look around you,

Elijah. Where are you? What is this place?” And if you remember back from your reading in Exodus, Elijah is on the very same mountain where God brought a discouraged, displaced, disoriented people and said, “I know you don’t know where you are, but I know where you are, and I know who you are, you are mine. You’re my people, you’re valuable to me, you’re useful to me and I’m not done with you yet.” God is going to use Elijah to appoint kings who will bring an end to the terror wrought by Jezebel as well as his own successor. So the story’s not over for Elijah.

Look at these two places you’ve been. You know what comes with the broom tree: nothing. But look at where you are now, and look at whose you are now. This is really the story of the Monarchy, the books of 1 Samuel to 2 Kings are all about how Israel wanted a king to rule over them, so God appointed Saul, and then David, and Solomon and then there was a period where the kingdom divided and there were 20 northern kings and 20 southern kings. And it gets pretty brutal at times, all these kings doing these horrible, horrible things. After a while you’re like, “Really are we doing this again?” and it gets a little difficult to stomach.

But underneath it all is this promise that God makes to David that one day there will come the true and everlasting king from his lineage, one day there will come the one who will ultimately triumph over all the Jezebels, all the Ahabs, all the idols that we put up for ourselves and will give us a true and everlasting hope. And that is the source of my hope, and that can be the source of your hope, as well. Jesus Christ is the great high king of heaven, and he’s the one who is asking you and me right now, what are you doing here? What is the meaning of this mountain for you?

Maybe you’re discouraged, maybe life isn’t going like you’d hoped, maybe you are in the middle of something that just seems too overwhelming to overcome. Think with me for a moment... What if God could take you on a journey through the story of your life – maybe you can hear the Sunday School teacher telling you about Jesus for the first time, maybe his name was Marshall Henderson. What if you could see Jesus miraculously changing lives by restoring sight to blind and raising people from the dead? What if you could journey with him up that mountain and see love poured out on the cross? And what if you could go and see that empty tomb where Jesus was not lying dead but miraculously and victoriously raised to new life so that we could be forgiven of our sin and offered that same new life? What if you were there on that mountain where he said, “I know you feel ill-equipped, but I’ve got a plan for your life to go and make disciples”? Would seeing these things enable you to face your discouragements in a different way? What are you doing here?

I want to close with some words of encouragement given by King George VI from his Christmas Day message of 1939. To a nation huddled together worried whether all out war would envelope them, whether their homeland would survive the terrors of the Third Reich, King George, having overcome his speech impediment, sat and spoke into a single microphone and offered these words of hope:

A new year is at hand. We cannot tell what it will bring. If it brings peace, how thankful we shall all be. If it brings us continued struggle we shall remain undaunted.

In the meantime, I feel that we may all find a message of encouragement in the lines which, in my closing words, I would like to say to you: 'I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year, "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied, "Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way.'"