

May 10, 2020 – Online/Remote Worship Service

“Low Points”

There’s something kind of poignant about the image of a man,
walking resolutely through the wilderness,
alone, his enemies pursuing him.
He keeps going, one foot in front of the other, until...
...he can’t, anymore.
A lone tree looms ahead of him,
and he collapses underneath it,
to wait for death.

It reads like a scene from a classic Western film:
one man, at the end of all things,
resources exhausted, strength and courage spent,
dying alone in a wild and inhospitable place.

But this lone, worn down man is no ordinary wanderer;
he is Elijah, one of God’s great prophets,
faithful, bold,
a doer of great deeds in God’s name.
God has done extraordinary things for Elijah
and through Elijah.
How did he end up here,
alone, afraid and ready to give up?

Turning back a few pages to see what Elijah has been up to,
what he did that so enraged King Ahab and Queen Jezebel...
...well, it doesn’t actually help us understand
why Elijah’s so despairing.

He’s just won an epic showdown against the prophets and priests of Baal,
a made-up god that a lot of Israel worshiped.
Baal had four hundred and fifty priests;
Elijah was alone, the last true prophet of God in all of Israel.

The deal was this: Baal’s priests would take one bull, and Elijah the other;
they’d set them up on their respective altars
and then call on their respective gods
to consume the bull with fire.

So the priests of Baal, all 450 of them, did just that:
they put the bull on the altar,

and chanted and danced and called out to Baal,
again and again and again,
until they were just limping around it...
...and nothing happened.

Then Elijah stepped forward.
He repaired the altar to God that had been destroyed;
he laid wood and put the bull's meat on it.
Then he had them pour twelve jars of water over it,
soaking the altar, the wood, the meat and the ground.
And then...he just asked:
answer me Lord,
so that the people will know that you,
O Lord, are God.

And the meat burned, and the wood burned,
and the stones burned, and the dust burned,
and even the water pooled around the altar burned.
And all the people fell to the ground and agreed
that the Lord is indeed God.
And Elijah and the people together
captured and killed all the priests of Baal.

This is a triumph, an extraordinary act of God,
worked through the extraordinary faith and courageous witness of Elijah.
King Ahab of Israel went and told his wife, Jezebel,
a fanatic Baal worshipper.
And she swore to likewise kill Elijah.
And Elijah...
...runs away, afraid,
and keeps running until he is exhausted;
he collapses under a tree,
and asks God to die.

So you see what I mean:
knowing what's just happened,
between the priests of Baal vs Elijah and his God...
...knowing all that still doesn't help us understand
how Elijah, prophet of God, doer of great deeds,
could be brought so low, so fast.
It seems unfaithful of Elijah,
ungrateful toward God...

...even unwise.

It'd be perfectly understandable for God to tell Elijah to buck up,
to stop being sorry for himself;
or God might've given him a stern talking to
about what being a prophet really means;
or reminded Elijah of the great things
that God has accomplished through him,
or lectured him about growing in his faith
through this new trial.
But...God does none of those things.

When Elijah prayed for death, laid down under that tree and fell asleep...
...I doubt if he expected to wake up.
But wake he did at the touch of an angel, who prepared food for him;
Elijah slept and ate again
and made a forty-day journey to the mountain of God.

When the Lord asks Elijah what he is doing there,
Elijah responds with a lament,
a litany of pain, fear, frustration, and loneliness:
I have served you faithfully;
the people have abandoned you
and the promises held dear between you;
I am the last of your prophets
and they are coming to kill me, too.
Heartrending stuff.

This is not, strictly speaking, an accurate report of how things are.
After the whole priests of Baal showdown,
the people started to look to God again,
and as we will hear soon,
there are prophets and faithful people left.

But God still answers Elijah's lament.

Elijah was used to spectacular revelations of God,
as he had received when taking apart the priests of Baal.
That's what Israel needed in that moment,
another overwhelming display of the Lord as God.
But that's not what Elijah needed now.

So a powerful wind tore the mountain apart, but God wasn't in the wind.

And a mighty earthquake shook the mountain,
 but God wasn't in the earthquake.
 Finally a fire blazed on the mountain,
 but God wasn't in the fire.

God is in the gentle voice, speaking into silence,
 that asks Elijah again: what are you doing here?
 And God listens to Elijah's answer.

When Elijah is at his worst moment, the absolute lowest point in his life...
 ...God feeds him, gives him the strength he needs to get to safety,
 and listens to the lament of his broken heart and flagging spirit.
 God is exactly, perfectly, what Elijah needs,
 at the high point of his greatest triumph,
 of public victory...
 ...and at his low point
 of private pain and despair.
 God is with Elijah,
 wherever he is.

There is both a lesson and good news for us in this story.
 Hitting rock bottom, finding ourselves as low as we've ever been,
 feeling exhausted, scared or just plain not okay...
 ...that does not move us out of God's reach,
 and it doesn't mean our faith is small or fragile.

We do not always have to be brave and effective;
 positive and hopeful;
 patient and at peace with whatever happens.
 It's okay to get angry, to be afraid,
 to be frustrated, to be sad, to be tired...
 ...as long as we take those feelings to God.
 Turning to God, even
 – especially –
 at our worst moments,
 is always a faithful act.

It's okay to fall down; because God is there.

We know God – just as Elijah did – to be a God who is...
 ...amazing;
 powerful, creating, holy,

passionate in his love for the poor, the vulnerable, the lost.
 God is all-knowing, eternal,
 just, steadfast in his promises to his people.

And yet, God also speaks of himself as a parent to his people, as our parent.

That's pretty close and personal.
 Jesus encouraged us to follow his example,
 thinking and speaking about God as a father,
 but it's here in the Old Testament too...

God spoke of rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt
 as being like a father
 carrying his son to safety
 through the wilderness,
 of his memories of Israel being like those of
 an indulgent loving parent,
 who scoops up their child
 and kisses their cheek
 as they learn to walk.

And I can't help but see some of that parental love right here,
 in how God is with Elijah when he is at his lowest point.
 How many of us have gone to a parent
 or someone who is like a parent to us,
 when we were brought low by pain, by fear,
 by frustration, confusion, loneliness, exhaustion.
 And were you sat down,
 fed and listened to and loved
 and picked up and put back
 on your feet?

That is how God is with Elijah in this lowest moment of his life;
 that is how God is with us, too.
 Elijah matters to God,
 we matter to God,
 not because of any great feats of discipleship
 we perform for God.
 We matter to God,
 not because we can overcome
 fear, worry, exhaustion,
 despair all on our own,
 either.
 We matter to God because God loves us and cares for us.

God tending to Elijah
 – caring for him, feeding him, listening to him and loving him –
 didn't magically fix everything.
 But God did give Elijah what he needed to keep going.

The last part of what God says to Elijah,
 about going to Damascus and anointing people as prophets
 and seven thousand faithful people still living in Israel...
 ...that's God giving Elijah
 purpose, hope, meaning,
 and even companions again.
 It's the answer to his lament:
 Not all of Israel is lost;
 you will not be killed;
 you are not alone;
 that is exactly what Elijah
 – one of God's great prophets, faithful, bold,
 a doer of great deeds in God's name –
 that's what Elijah needed.
 And God gave it to him.

Like Elijah, when we, at times, have run as far as our strength can take us,
 and we're ready to lay down under our own shade-trees and give up,
 God responds with life and hope.

In every situation, even – especially – when we're at our lowest point,
 God makes redemption possible for us:
 restoration and freedom, healing and wholeness,
 whether it's from our own sinfulness
 or from our suffering because of the sins of others.

Turning to God with our pain, our exhaustion,
 our hopelessness, our fear,
 that's a profoundly, deeply, faithful thing to do.
 And when we do, we know
 that God cares;
 God listens;
 and God will give us what we need.
 Thanks be to God!
 AMEN.