

"WHEN ALL SEEMS LOST"

"....and Elijah asked that he might die, saying, 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life'"

(I Kings 19: 4)

INTRODUCTION

One need be neither psychic nor prophetic to sense that many in our land today - north, south, east and west - are caught in the grip of a discouragement that borders on despair. More is changing than we can absorb. More is crumbling than we can preserve. More is knowable than we can learn. More is possible than we can do.

Besides this energy crisis with which government and business grapple, there is an energy crisis of the human spirit. There are many who feel that life is asking more of them than they can possibly give. And if you feel that way today, I have some reassuring and helpful news for you. At the very least you stand in good company; for the mighty Elijah of Old Testament fame knew that feeling, too.

Elijah was some cut of a man! I went back and read his story again this week in preparation for this sermon. In courage and ruggedness, he was to resemble John the Baptist. Fearless before royalty, undaunted by majority pressures, and with a voice that none could mute, Elijah commands our respect.

The Jewish composer, Felix Mendelssohn, enshrined Elijah in a celebrated oratorio, two selections from which you have heard this hour. John Keble romanticized about his hero, Elijah, when we penned,

"O for a sculptor's hand that thou mightest take thy stand;
Thy wild hair floating in the Eastern breeze".

DEVELOPMENT

Elijah's mood of depression came about in this fashion. A prophet in Israel in the 9th century BC, he felt that most of his nation's troubles stemmed from the Ahab-Jezebel-Baalshim complex. Like many intense, manic types, he yearned for a showdown and he got it. You'll remember that it came on Mount Carmel where he engaged the priests of Baal in a test of faith. First, they called down fire to ignite the sacrifice, but the fire did not come. Then Elijah called and fire came and the sacrifice was consumed. And seeing his victory as a gift of God and a triumph for the true religion, Elijah made bold to slay the prophets of Baal. It's not a pretty picture, for we're told that their blood was mingled with the waters of a nearby brook.

Peace at last! But, no! His victory was hardly celebrated before he received a threatening communication from Jezebel that he was marked for death. Forced to flee, he took off for the wilderness. There, exhausted, he sat himself down under a juniper tree and asked to die. "It is enough" he cried, "Now, O Lord, take away my life for I am no better than my fathers". In effect, he was saying, "Look, I've had it and I want out".

HOW DID HE GET THAT WAY

You ask, "How did Elijah ever get into such a frame of mind?" One rather obvious factor was his physical exhaustion. Nothing looks good, not even the kingdom of God, when you're tired and run down. Going at a pretty fast clip, producing intensely for the kingdom, this man had become physically drained. Food and rest were called for, and a careful reading of the record indicates that God gave him sleep and sent a messenger to provide him with food and water.

We're reminded here that the state of the body conditions the mood of the mind. Certainly our Christian Science friends have no monopoly on this truth. One should never make a critical life decision while exhausted. I've always felt that our important decisions need to be made in the morning hours when energies are fresh and not at the end of the day when they're depleted. No reputable psychiatrist will proceed with a patient without first ordering a physical exam.

MISREAD GOD'S WAY IN HISTORY

Another factor that induced Elijah's despair stemmed from his misreading of God's way in history. He adopted what today we would call a "reductionist" view of the problem. He had determined that Ahab and Jezebel were the perpetrators of wrong, and that they were being funded and kept in power by a craven theology expounded by the priests of Baal. Therefore, if one could eliminate the theology and put to rout the priests of Baal, God's will would soon be done on earth even as it is in heaven!

There is longing here on Elijah's part for closure. I suppose all who tend to be intense in the service of God long for the showdown that will settle matters once and for all between the good boys and the bad boys. Perhaps this is why baseball continues to make its appeal to so many. After two or three hours there is a winning pitcher and a losing pitcher. There is a decision; the game is over.

But in this year of the Watergate, we are being reminded that evil and wrong doing are more pervasive and complicated than this. Besides, God does not always break down events into the same chapter divisions or innings that we do. He doesn't always add up the score when we think He should. Sometimes it takes Him a while to total up accounts. Elijah was in a hurry. He wanted a decision, once and for all. Maybe it's wise to remember that the good guys are never all good, nor the bad guys all bad. It's not our place to declare any event in history a watershed event, with the thought that safely passing it we will see the kingdom of God come flooding in with all its glory.

God's will is not to be equated with the momentary passions of any man or age. In short, all of us who take God and the moral law seriously must learn to be patient, to live with ambiguous and deferred results. Those words of Longfellow passed through my mind at this point in my preparation:

"Though the mills of God grind slowly,
yet they grind exceeding small;
Thou with patience He stands waiting,
with exactness grinds He all"

SELF-PITY, TOO

Moving on, we find that much of Elijah's despair results from an acute case of self-pity. Those of you who were around back in August may recall that one of my sermons touched upon self-pity. I believe it is by far the most costly luxury that we mortals can indulge in. Self-pity can prevent healing, prolong bereavement, and generally blunt our effectiveness for God and man. Well, I think Elijah had a pretty good case of it. Listen as we pick up some of his words:

"I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant; thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the swords. And I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away".

Someone once suggested that self-pity is the perennial temptation of morally

superior people. Who knows. Perhaps so. Paul engaged in a bit of self-pity when he cried, "Demas has deserted me". Jesus himself veared in that direction when from the cross he cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And here we read, "And I, even I only, am left"....."and they seek my life to take it away". All this I have done for you, Lord, and what have you done for me. It wasn't a kleenex that someone needed to give Elijah, but rather a bolt of terry cloth!

GOD MOVED HIM God found his man under a juniper tree, but God did not leave him there. It's interesting to note how the Lord brought Elijah around. He broke the prophet's mood with a sharp question of accountability asking him several times, "What does thou here, Elijah?" Here was a reminder that he was a man under command. That he was really not responsible for the master plan, but solely for his own obedience within that plan. God found him a soldier "absent without leave", and summoned him back to active duty.

Elijah had analyzed well what was wrong. Chances are he had memorized his analysis. Notice the ring to his words, "They have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, slain thy prophets with the sword". But what was required now was not analysis, but action; not discussion, but decision; not debate, but some tough discipleship. Never you mind what I'm doing there, what are you doing here?

I believe the unenlisted are most prone to fall prey to despair and to sin against life in this fashion. The unenlisted, the uninvolved, those who do nothing but criticize the efforts of those who are trying. Some time back I came across a poem by Sarah Henderson Hay that has burned its way into my mind. I find myself coming back to this poem at times when I start searching around for a juniper tree of my own.

"It is a piteous thing to be enlisted in no cause at all;
Unsworn to any heraldry, to fly no banner from the wall.
Own nothing you would sweat or try for, or bruise your
hands or bleed or die for.

Ah, that were a greater sin against that hostage of your
living breast,
Than to rouse all the world incensed at something you
believed your quest;
And stormed the skies and suffered pain for and fell and
cursed and fought again for!

To choose the smooth and easy path, the half-heart interest,
the creed without extreme of hope or wrath.
Ah, there were a heresy indeed, that all God's mercy will not
stay for,
And your immortal soul will pay for!"

GOD CHALLENGED HIM "What doest thou here, Elijah?" Beyond this, the Lord moved in on Elijah and proceeded to challenge his self-pity. In effect Elijah was saying to God, "God, this is such a forsaken place that only you and have any light".

God, in substance, responds - nonsense, why I can number at least 7,000 who have not bowed the knee to Gaal. How did you come to assume that you have sufficient perspective to know how large God's legions are. He is never without his witnesses. Some may not trade under our familiar brand names - Methodist, Baptist, Anglican,

Catholic - but they are His witnesses nonetheless. Some may not gather under our denominational roofs, but they are still there. And when we ask the question of the old gospel hymn that we use to sing in Sunday School, "Who is on the Lord's side?" - the only honest answer we can give is that we really don't know. We might be surprised to see who's there - for many who say they're on the Lord's side are not, and many who say they are not, really are!

It reminds us of the time that an angry, outraged disciple protested to our Lord, "Master, master, we just saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us". And Jesus quietly said, "Do not forbid him; for he that is not against you is for you". I've thought of this incident a number of times this past year, but most recently Saturday night a week ago when my wife and I encountered one of the young street evangelists of Dr. Moon on 86th Street. "He that is not against you"....."is for you"...

IT DOESN'T END WITH YOU

But to me the most helpful thing that God did for this man bogged down in despair was to pull back the curtain just a little and let him see that the story he was involved in would go on. This is one of our important needs. The more zealous and committed we are, the more we tend to make deductions about God from how matters fare where we're working. I suppose if we take the Western world as a section right now, things don't look that good. But the reason why things are difficult in the Western world is because the "third world" people who have been sustaining much of our life for many years now are themselves moving into a larger appropriation for life. If the sun looks as though it's peaked for us, it may be rising for them.

In effect then, God was saying to Elijah - it doesn't all end with you. Where you've been working is only one part of it. My purposes have a longer future than you have thought of. They will not die with you because they were not born with you. I want you to get up and go and anoint Hazael to be King of Syria, because it's not yet finished with the Gentiles. Then I want you to anoint Jehu to be King of Israel, for I am not yet done with my chosen ones. And then I want you to anoint Elisha as your successor, for I have still other words to speak to other generations.

Elijah's experience on the mountain was one experience by one man on one mountain. God had yet other men on other mountains and other days and other means by which to have His will worked out. And standing as we do on this side of Jesus Christ, we have something to go on that Elijah didn't have even on his brightest day. It is our belief, made real by faith, that God's purposes for all mankind were uniquely clarified and certified in Jesus, the Son of His love. It is our belief that Christ did not simply survive death, He reversed it; that he did not simply contain evil, He defeated it. That His Kingdom - however low its profile may be in different times and places - His kingdom is both invincible and sure! This I believe...

with every ounce of my being.

Watergate, Agnew, the Middle East, inflation, crime, drugs, energy crisis, disloyalty, faithlessness. At times we feel like Elijah "Lord, it is enough". But remember that when all seems lost, it really isn't. This is God's world. We are still His people. His plan still holds. Our work still matters. Our witness is still needed.

PRAYER

Lord, touch our eyes....lest the problems and vexations of these trying days blind us to thy purposes. Keep us hopeful, faithful, productive servants of causes greater than ourselves, and willing servants of that love that never fails. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

for a little while at least, a kind of forgetfulness about the reality of life. It gives them a numbness that seems welcome at the moment. Unfortunately, it only tends to complicate and make one less able to cope with a problem.

For some people, illness - physical or mental - may be the means of escaping, the convenient cave where one can hide. We can laugh at the five year old who announces brazenly, "Tomorrow I'm going to be sick and will have to stay home from Nursery School". But, it's less amusing, indeed pathetic, when a forty year old tries the same tactic in order to evade a situation he or she doesn't want to face.

Perhaps one of the most trying of all persons is the man or woman who wallows in self-pity, rehearsing again and again the injuries which he has experienced, the slights he imagines he has suffered, the heart-aches he has borne, the wrongs that others have inflicted upon him. Self-pity is another kind of save into which people sometimes crawl.

For some religion can be a kind of cave where one retreats from the world and its demands. This is not good; this is a poor use of religion. The Church and victorious religion should be a school for learning, not a cave of retreat.

There are many other caves one could mention and when we become discouraged, when we hurt with the pain we carry, a cave seems like a good solution.

I was crossing Lexington Avenue recently here at 86th Street and was handed this slip of paper.

"Rev. Olga. E. S. P. Reader and Advisor. Card Readings.
Advice On All Your Problems. 116 East 84th Street. Hours
by Appointment. Telephone 744 -8590".

For some, it may be Rev. Olga, or some counsellor, or psychiatrist, or what have you. A cave may seem like a good solution. Only this: it never is a final solution for the problem. It wasn't for Elijah, nor is it for us. There is no way to hide from life's blessed moments and there is also no way to hide from its bitter and unpleasant ones. Neither Elijah in his cave on the mountain, nor we in our caves will be allowed to get away with such evasion. This is not God's will for us.

WHAT HAPPENED Suppose we look again at Elijah and see what else happened. He was cowering in his cave and the voice of the Lord came to him, demanding: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

Chances are, if he had been honest with himself, he would have said, "God, I'm scared...frightened...that's why I'm hiding". But instead, like most of us, he tried to justify himself before God and he proceeded to recite all of his grievances - the terrible things he had suffered - and piously suggested that he was alone in the world in his loyalty to God. Nobody had ever had it quite so bad; talk about self-pity.

Pause for a moment and reflect on this: sometimes our deepest discouragement comes after our greatest success. Perhaps it is only natural, for sometimes in our success we do allow ourselves to get an exaggerated sense of our own importance.

I have a friend who is a minister who, after many years of faithful service

in one town moved to another town. The people in his former parish missed him greatly and spoke so lavishly in their regard of him and what he had meant to them. I mentioned to this to him a few days ago when I saw him. He spoke of how he was sorry to leave, but perhaps the move was a good one if only to remind him, as he put it, "of the fragile nature of success". That's a beautiful phrase - "the fragile nature of success". This may be part of the cause of our feeling of discouragement. We can't stay on the mountain top forever. We have to come down and sometimes it's difficult to do this. Sometimes we get to thinking that we're better and more important than we are.

I think if we are to learn how to deal with discouragement and disappointment, then we must be prepared to answer the same question the Lord is reported to have put to Elijah: "What are you doing in that cave?" And we must be prepared to answer that question honestly. It may be that we're there from feelings of self-pity because we have not grown up emotionally to the point where we realize that this sort of thing can happen to us. It can happen to anyone. God plays no favorites.

COME OUT OF THE CAVE

We need to hear his second word, too. "Come out of the cave, Elijah, and stand upon the mountain".

Elijah did so and you may recall that he then experienced the most remarkable religious experience recorded in the Bible. The tremendous power of the Lord poured down on him. The earth trembled; a mighty whirlwind surged around him; a consuming fire raged. Elijah was terrified. Against this cosmic display of the Almighty in nature what could he do and what did his little life add up to.

But Elijah found that the Lord was not in the earthquake, nor was He in the wind, or in the fire. Instead the spirit of the Lord came to Him as a still, small voice speaking in his own heart and assuring him of a peace, of a power, of a presence that was even more real to him than any physical manifestation of God in nature could ever be.

IMPORTANT POINT

In times of discouragement, we need to be brought out of our caves to stand in that place where we can find and experience God through Jesus Christ. We need to experience His presence, His power and relate it to our lives. Here, in places like this, people try to expose their lives through prayer and worship to His life and His spirit. Here, they seek to hear His word and find His will. Insight, direction, new perspective, renewed strength - all come as a person stands before God.

Helen Hayes had a daughter, Mary, who, when she was 20, was stricken with polio. Miss Hayes said:

"I went to Church every morning to pray, but I had become careless with my religion and had all but cut God out of my life. I didn't have the nerve to ask Him to make my daughter well. I prayed only for understanding. When Mary died, I felt my prayers had not been answered. But I later learned that this experience gave my life meaning which until then had escaped me. I became a living part of God's world of people".

GO BACK

The last word that God had for Elijah was this:

"Go back. Go back to the situation from which you have come. You have completely misperceived the situation. You are not alone. There are still 7,000 persons in Israel who are loyal to me. Find them and get on about my business."

And so Elijah, ordered back into life, left his mountain and went back to try to carry through on God's will for his life. And, in a way, isn't this what is demanded of us. So often, the temptation is to linger in the cave, or to avoid facing the reality of a situation. But we are sent back into life to do battle with it, to face it, to struggle with it, to overcome, to let the winds of life blow against us.

Bishop Gerald Kenney put it this way:

"The thing which the children of God need the most is not to be withdrawn from the bombardments of life and be physically safe and sound. It is to come to know again the security which is ours in God, who surrounds us with his protection even when the dangers of life are the hardest to bear."

I believe that God has the power to redeem our disappointments and to turn them into something constructive, if we will let Him. There's no disappointment beyond his power. This is what I believe He was doing in the cross on Calvary. We need to remember that "when one door of happiness closes, another is opening. But so often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which is opening to us".

This is what I understand a Rabbi of Judaism to mean when he said to a group of people what he thought was the unique thing about Christianity:

"The unique thing about Christianity is that it never gives anyone up. It never lets anyone go. It always helps a person to begin again. There is always the possibility of a fresh start, a new beginning."

There are those times in life when we need to hear this word. And perhaps in our congregation this morning there is some one person who needs to hear it now: to be reminded that there is the chance to begin all over again today - putting all that is past behind you...to look forward to the future. Yes, to take God's word to Elijah:

"Come out of your cave. Stand on the mountain. Experience God's power and presence in your life. Go back to that situation from which you have come..."

PRAYER In those moments of great despair, when the pressures of life seem to exceed our human power to meet them, save us from ever thinking the end has come. Make us sensitive to Your presence, your nearness. Remind us that we live - not by ourselves, but by the strength You have given each of us. Amen.