

## The Prophets and the Kings: The Call of Elisha

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Kings 19:13b-21

I want briefly to recall where we saw Elijah last week. When last we saw our hero he was standing triumphant on the top of Mount Carmel. He had defeated the priests of Baal! He had called fire down from heaven. The people were all shouting “The Lord He is God!” You might expect that this event would lead to a season of sunshine and happiness for Elijah. It doesn’t. Ahab and Jezebel redouble their efforts to kill him and he sinks into a depression. It’s the deepest funk of his life. He’s something like suicidal.

At the beginning of chapter 19 he throws himself under a tree in the wilderness and asks to die. The Lord sends an angel to strengthen him and feed him, but he’s still pretty down and in his funk he decides to journey to Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai) where he hides himself in a cave. In that cave God comes to him and asks him the same pointed question two times. “What are you doing here Elijah?” We will pick up the story at the second time God asks the question

Read 1 Kings 19:13b-21. Two times God comes to him and says, “What are you doing Elijah?” Two times Elijah gives God exactly the same answer. Two times God asks his question and, each time, Elijah gives the same sulky answer, word for word. “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant and torn down your altars and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left and now they are trying to kill me too.”

The fact that Elijah’s answer is repeated verbatim tells us something. It’s a rehearsed story. This is a ‘woe is me’ story that Elijah has been telling himself, and he’s been telling himself so often he’s got it memorized. You can imagine him grumbling it to himself when he was under the broom tree. You can see him walking through the wilderness towards Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai) grumbling this story. You can imagine him sitting in the darkness of the cave grumbling. “I been working so hard over here, I’ve been working 80 hour weeks, I’ve been busting my hump and I’m the only one. And no one notices, no one helps, and no one cares, and nothing changes.” Elijah can repeat this story verbatim because it’s his internal grumble and he’s been telling it to himself over and over again.

I bet you know what it’s like to have an internal grumble. We humans are good at that. ‘My brother is the one who leaves the toys out and Mom always makes me clean up!’ “Those Gen Z and those Millennials, they don’t know how to work hard!” ‘My sister Mary is just sitting in there with Jesus enjoying herself laughing with those disciples and I’m in the kitchen by myself cleaning up this enormous mess.’ It’s a thing humans do. We all tell ourselves grumble stories. We work ourselves into a state. If we tell ourselves the story often enough, if we chew on the story, if we let it simmer it can become a place where we live.

And here’s the tricky thing about Elijah’s grumble story: sometimes when we grumble it’s petty and small – “I got a cold on my vacation, the world is unfair!” But is Elijah’s concern petty and small? Is he just grumbling about a small thing? Elijah might be working himself up, but his concerns are not small. They are real. You can absolutely understand why Elijah would feel beat down. You can absolutely understand why he would feel like he’d been dealt a bad hand. He’d been running from Ahab for as long as could remember. He’d endured drought. He’d endured exile. Sure, he’d seen miracles. Sure, he’s seen fire fall from heaven, but had anything really changed in the world?

Sometimes the grumble stories we tell ourselves are trivial. But sometimes, the pain is very real, the loss is very real, the injustice is very real, and the perplexity is very, very real. In Psalm 90, in the middle of a Psalm that is ultimately a Psalm of trust the Psalmist blurts out, “Lord, make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us!” Psalm 90:15. Do you remember that line? For some of us who are living through a long season of weakness, or a long season of pain, or a long season of loss, that’s a prayer we can relate to. That’s a prayer you can pray right from the center of our heart.

So, Elijah's afflictions are real, and I would say there's one thing he does right with those afflictions and one thing he does wrong. The thing he does wrong is the thing we were talking about before. He's been meditating on his afflictions. He'd made himself a grumble story. He'd told it to himself so often he has his grievance memorized, word for word. It's become the story he tells his soul. He's been meditating on his troubles through the watches of the night.

And while that's completely understandable, it's the opposite of the Spiritual advice that the Holy Spirit gives us in the Bible. In the Bible the Spirit is training us to think on God and his promises. Psalm 63:6 – "On my bed I remember you, I think of you through the watches of the night." Psalm 42: "Why are you downcast O my soul! Put your hope in God for I will yet praise him." Philippians 4, "Whatever is good and noble, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think on these things." So, the Spirit is teaching us to meditate on our blessings and God's goodness, but we are small and we are easily frightened, so sometimes our sorrows are playing on repeat in our head. That's where Elijah is, and while it's understandable, it's not good.

Here's the good thing Elijah does. He goes to a God place. He goes to Mount Sinai. He thinks of the stories of his people and he knows that Mount Sinai is the place where God showed himself. Sinai is the place where God told his people who they were and what they were supposed to do. So, he goes there looking for God, looking for a word in the middle of his struggle. Just like Moses he goes to a cleft in the rock, a cave hoping that the God of his ancestors will pass by. And God does show up. God speaks to him in the silence.

And God does two things for Elijah in that encounter. First, he reminds Elijah that he is still the king of kings. Elijah looks at Jezebel and Ahab, he looks at the things they are doing and his world is falling apart. God reminds him that he is in charge of geopolitical events. "Go anoint Jehu king of Israel. Go anoint Hazeal king of Aram." Elijah probably doesn't even know who these two guys are. But God knows. They are his chosen instruments to deal with Ahab's shenanigans. They are his chosen instruments to bend history in the direction he wants. "Yes, things are messy, but nothing Ahab has done, nothing any King or president or prime minister can do will ever prevent me from accomplishing my purposes."

God doesn't quite say to Elijah, don't worry about politics, don't worry about Ahab. But he does put a fence around Elijah's responsibility and his worry. In effect, he tells Elijah, "I have other people who will take care of Ahab. Here's your job. Go anoint those guys. I will worry about everything else."

There is something here for modern believers. Do we have a tendency to worry about everything all the time all at once? Yes. Yes, we do. This week I read a really good letter written by C.S Lewis to a friend named Dom Griffiths. This letter was written way before the advent of the internet and social media, but it's a good word for all of us who get obsessed with all the news stories all the time.

"It is one of the evils of rapid diffusion of news that the sorrows of all the world come to us every morning. I think each village was meant to feel pity for its own sick and poor whom it can help, and I doubt if it is the duty of any private person to fix his mind on ills which he cannot help. (This may even become an escape from the works of charity we really can do to those we know.) A great many people ... do now seem to think that the mere state of being worried is in itself meritorious. I don't think it is. We must, if it so happens, give our lives for others: but even while we're doing it, I think we're meant to enjoy Our Lord and, in Him, our friends, our food, our sleep, our jokes, and the birds' song, and the frosty sunrise. [The distant future may be very dark], but there's usually light enough for the next step or so."

Second, God gently challenges Elijah in a place where he is clearly wrong. In his grumble story, Elijah says, "I am the only one left." He complains about it twice. "Lord, I'm working really hard and I'm doing it all by myself." It's not the first time he's said something like that. If you remember last week's text, when he's on Mount Carmel facing down the prophets of Baal, he says, "I am the only one of the Lord's prophets left!" Put those two together and you can see Elijah is feeling isolated and alone in his work.

But here's the strange thing. He's not alone. And he should know that he's not alone. Right before he meets Ahab on the mountain he runs into another prophet named Obadiah. Obadiah tells Elijah that he has hidden 100 other prophets of the Lord in caves to protect them from Ahab. Elijah knows those prophets are around and yet he says, "It's only me. I'm all by myself. Woe is me."

I don't want to be too critical of a man who's going through a difficult time, but is it possible that Elijah is glamorizing his pain? Is it possible that he's adding a little extra color to his story of woe so he will sound more tragic and heroic? "Woe is me! No one has seen sorrow like mine!" I think that's what we typically do when we get lost in our sorrow. We isolate ourselves. Grief isolates. We feel alone and if we meditate on our grief in a way that allows pride to become a part of it, our grief can make ourselves into a tragic hero. "No one can understand what I am going through." If pride takes strong enough hold, we can get angry at people for not understanding how we feel, and then get angry at them when they say, "I understand how you feel." Sorrow and loss are miserable conditions, but they are also extremely fertile ground for the evil one.

If pride and isolation are starting to creep into Elijah's grief God gently challenges it. "Elijah, stop isolating yourself. Go back to where you came. You are not alone. Not even close. I have 7000 faithful followers in Israel, and all of them are fighting just like you." God also does something very personal to help him with his isolation. He gives Elijah a companion, he gives Elijah a colleague, he gives Elijah a friend. "Go to anoint Elisha to be your successor," he says.

And so Elijah goes back home and he finds the Shaphat household. Out in the fields a young man is managing his Father's farm. He's out in the field driving a yoke of oxen. Elijah walks over to him and throws his robe over the shoulders of the astonished boy. "Follow me!", he says. Elisha says yes. He goes back home, kisses his parents good-bye, he burns the yoke, slaughters the oxen, and he leaves his old life behind. He follows Elijah wholeheartedly. And now Elijah is not alone. The work is still hard. His enemy is still formidable, but now he doesn't face the enemy alone. He has a friend.

We are not meant to fight the battles of life alone. We are not meant to fight the battles of the kingdom alone. Even Jesus needed a community. Jesus surrounded himself with disciples. Were they a pain in the neck sometimes? Yes! But he still valued them. He even needed them. Remember how in the Garden of Gethsemane he pleaded with them to stay and pray with him on the night before he died? Our grief wants to isolate us, our fear wants to isolate us, but the Holy Spirit brings us into community.

Of course Elisha isn't just a friend for Elijah, he's an intergenerational friend. God isn't just providing companionship for a tired prophet; he's preparing another generation of leaders for his people, for his covenant, for his kingdom. That's a good thing for us to remember on Christian Education Sunday. God is giving Elijah a friend, but he's also giving him responsibility for passing faith to the next generation. That's our responsibility too, and we have exercised that responsibility through these wonderful institutions of Christian schools, places where we throw our mantle over the next generation and prepare them to follow Jesus.

I became a grandpa this week. You knew I'd have to work that into the sermon somehow. But I am indeed a Grandpa now, and it's pretty great. It also means that I'm officially part of the old guy class. Sometimes, like Elijah, we old guys (women too) like to tell ourselves grouchy stories about the state of the world. Sometimes, again just like Elijah, those stories are true; there really are terrible things happening.

But may this story remind us grouchy old guys of the faithfulness of God's covenantal promises, the goodness of this community, and the call for our generation to support institutions and structures that will pass faith on to the next generation. Times are complicated, but the God who sent his son to the world to die for us, will not abandon his people or his promises. So, while occasional grumbling is permitted, let our baseline be hope, and may we run our race with joy.

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