

JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS
LENT 2--ELIJAH IN THE WILDERNESS

(03/17/19)

Scripture Lesson: 1 Kings 19:1-18

“The angel of the Lord came to him a second time, touched him, and said, ‘Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’ He [Elijah] 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.”

(1 Kings 19:7-8)

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. The season of Lent, forty days (and six Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, is a time set aside in preparation for the celebration of Easter. During this time, Christians express their thankfulness for the sacrificial love of Jesus by participating in a spiritual discipline of fasting, penance, and reflection. In the early church, the season of Lent was the period of instruction for catechumens, those who desired to be baptized into the Christian faith. This baptism, not only in the days of the early church but also today in our Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, takes place on Holy Saturday Eve or early Easter morning.

The forty days of Lent reminds us of several places in the Bible where a wilderness experience is tied to the number forty. As we noted last week, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness following his baptism. This morning we heard the story of the prophet Elijah and his preparation for the forty days of his wilderness journey.

If we use the spiritual disciplines of Lent to strengthen the power of the Holy Spirit within us, we may be able to experience the healing, comforting, empowering energy of God when we, like Jesus and Elijah, pass through what the 23rd Psalm calls “the valley of the shadow of death,” also translated as “the valley of deep darkness.” We will not only survive our wilderness experiences we will be psychologically or spiritually transformed by them!

By the time we’re done with our Lenten series, you are all going to be experts on the number forty! I know what you’re thinking: that plus \$2.50 will get me a large Dunkin Donuts coffee. Jim Holmes would remind us that that plus \$1.06 will get you a large Cumberland Farms coffee. But you never know. When you reach the pearly gates, wouldn’t you be surprised if the entrance exam was about the archetypal significance of the number forty? Then you’d be happy that you were here—and that you stayed awake during the sermon!

What do we know about Elijah? Elijah was an Israelite prophet who lived in the first half of the ninth century B.C.E., during the reign of kings Ahab and Ahaziah. Elijah is the protagonist of four stories in the book of Kings. Today we are focusing on the latter part of the first of these stories. The basic story is as follows.

Elijah calls forth a drought from God to punish Israel for worshiping false gods. Prophets were really tough on their people back in those days, especially when the parishioners did not live up to their expectations! The drought ends in a contest between Elijah and the priests of Baal: the god who answers his prophet's call by burning the sacrifice on the stone altar with fire from heaven will be declared to be the one true god. Elijah wins. Yahweh, the God of Israel is vindicated, and Elijah then slaughters four hundred of the priests of Baal. Prophets in those days were really tough on their competition as well as their own people!

The wicked queen Jezebel, seeking vengeance for the slaughter of her priests, vows to kill Elijah. Elijah flees to Horeb, where he has a powerful religious experience. God commands him to anoint Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha to carry on the fight against Baal. The first story ends with Elisha becoming Elijah's disciple.

This morning I would like us to focus on Elijah as he flees from the wrath of Jezebel and also from his own people, who were understandably annoyed that he had visited them with the drought. Elijah comes to Beersheba, which should be a relatively safe place to stay since it is part of the territory occupied by the tribe of Judah. However, scripture tells us that Elijah leaves his servant there, in the place of safety, while he goes forth alone into the wilderness.

This passage reminds me of the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob, who has cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, flees to Haran where he stays with and works for his uncle Laban. But Jacob cannot stay there forever. Sooner or later he has to return to the land of his birth and claim his place in the spiritual evolution of his people. On his way back, the day before he is going to meet his estranged brother, Jacob leaves his two wives, his eleven children, and his servants and enters the wilderness alone. There he has a powerful religious experience; he wrestles with an angel who both wounds him and blesses him.

Like Jacob, Elijah has his encounter with the angel of God when he is alone by himself in the wilderness. Remember, the wilderness is not only a physical place. It is also the mental and spiritual state in which we find ourselves during the difficult times of our lives. The wilderness

experience is the time of trial, the time of ordeal, the time when we are tempted to turn back to a life which we know is not really healthy, a life that is not meant to be our future. According to scripture, the wilderness is often the place where we encounter or are encountered by God.

1 Kings 19:4 tells us that Elijah goes a day's journey into the wilderness and sits down under a solitary broom tree. Elijah is afraid for his life. Scripture tells us,

[Elijah] 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.

Elijah is obviously depressed. If you have ever been depressed, you will recognize the symptoms. Elijah engages in negativistic thinking. He has withdrawn from others and from life. He is not eating or drinking. He is feeling helpless and hopeless. He experiences suicidal ideation, believing that the world would be better off without him. He seeks to escape his inner torment by falling asleep.

If you have ever been depressed, if you have ever had a wilderness experience, you might recognize some or all of these symptoms. You might also find it heartening to remember that one of the greatest prophets of all time experienced the same psychological and spiritual struggles and torments that you have when he went through his own wilderness experience!

Elijah, in the throes of despair, upset that life isn't going the way he wanted, lies down under a tree and falls asleep. Suddenly an angel appears. Because Elijah is asleep at the time, his interaction with the angel probably took place in what we would call a dream. And what does the angel say to Elijah in the dream? What words of wisdom does this messenger from God bring to Elijah? The angel tells Elijah, "Get up and eat."

Get up and eat! These are indeed words of wisdom for Elijah and also for us when we are passing through the valley of deep darkness. Elijah, like all of us, has outer problems, but *his outer problems are exacerbated by his inner attitude*. Elijah wishes his outer problems would go away. He wishes they would disappear. He doesn't think it is fair that he should be unjustly persecuted. So, he curls up under his little tree and sulks.

Get up and eat! Get dressed! Go to work! Clean your house! Go for a walk! Call a friend! Volunteer at a soup kitchen! Don't sit around feeling sorry for yourself because life is unjust or unfair! Life is life! You have a job to do! Get up and do it!

If we think of the angel as a psychotherapist, we might say that he/she is a little light on the sympathy that is regarded as an important part of psychotherapy! The angel employs what we would call tough love. The angel doesn't want to hear Elijah's complaints about how his life is both difficult and unfair. The angel knows that Elijah has a job to do, a contribution to make to life on behalf of God. This is not the time for Elijah to sit around sucking his thumb and feeling sorry for himself. The angel tells Elijah: "Get up! Eat! Begin the journey!"

Elijah rises and discovers that the angel has miraculously provided him with the food he needs for his journey. Scripture tells us again and again that when we are in the wilderness, God will provide. God fed the Israelites during their forty years in the wilderness with quail, manna from heaven, and water from the rock. When Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, "the angels ministered to him." When we are in the wilderness, all we need to do is open our eyes. God has already provided what we need. All we have to do is rise and partake.

Elijah does as the angel commands, but then he suffers a relapse. He decides to go back to sleep. He is still stuck in his depression. He still feels the power of that inertia that makes it difficult for us to get out of bed some mornings. The angel returns to Elijah. The angel tells Elijah to get up and eat. The angel tells him that if he doesn't take care of himself, he will not have the strength he needs to undertake the journey, a journey that will last forty days.

What feeds us when we are stuck in the depression that often accompanies a wilderness experience? Some people find emotional nourishment through psychotherapy or support groups, others through the encouragement of friends. Some rediscover a reservoir of energy when they force their body to move, when they go back to the gym or just take a walk. Some are fed by reading something that helps them understand what it is that is pulling them under. Some are fed by music. Different things feed different people.

There are some things, however, that feed all people. No matter who we are and what sort of wilderness we are experiencing, we can all reach out to others. The best remedy when we are feeling sorry for ourselves is to reach out to someone in need! How many fathers get out of bed and put one foot in front of another because they have a commitment to support their family? How many mothers keep going when they are totally exhausted because they know their children need them? We can all reach out to someone in need. The energy that we can find when we do this is nourishment for our soul. It is truly bread for the journey!

We need to remember that when we find ourselves in the wilderness, like Elijah, we can be fed by the Word of God. We can turn to scripture for comfort and guidance. We can open ourselves to God in prayer. We can talk to Jesus about what we are going through. We can become an integral part of a church community. God reaches out to us in many different ways, including the church. All we need to do is wake up! All we need to do is get up and eat!

Elijah gets up, takes the nourishment that has been provided by the angel, and then sets forth on his journey. He travels forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. At Mount Horeb, Elijah has another powerful religious experience. God appears to Elijah as a great wind, an earthquake, a fire, and finally, in “a still small voice,” also translated as “a sound of sheer silence.” Following his religious experience, Elijah receives instruction that will guide him in his ongoing battle against the priests of Baal.

One of the spiritual disciplines that has traditionally been associated with the season of Lent is the discipline of giving up. We make a commitment to try to give up those parts of our lives that are unhealthy, that hurt us or others, that drag us down rather than build us up. We can and should do this, not only during Lent but throughout the year. To use Jesus’ words, we need to prune the vine, the vine of our life, removing all those branches that do not bear fruit.

As we mentioned two weeks ago, this involves a process of discernment. We need to discern the good from the bad, the healthy from the unhealthy, the creative from the destructive. We need to distinguish the “good things in life” from the “best things.” The “best things,” our spiritual journey, the deepening of our relationship with God, the shaping of our soul, often happens during and through what we might call a wilderness experience.

Lent is also a time to remember the promises of our Lord. The promise that God will not forsake us. The promise that God will provide what we need on our journey. All we have to do is open our eyes to see it, open our hearts to receive it, and open our lives to embrace it. When we do this, we open ourselves to the experience of Resurrection that can follow the Good Fridays of our lives.

The bread and wine that is given to a penitent by a priest during the sacramental administration of Last Rites, is called the *viaticum*. The word “viaticum” literally means “bread for the journey.” It is a spiritual nourishment, a spiritual sustenance for the journey upon which the dying person is about to embark.

Jesus reaches out to us just like the angel reached out to Elijah. Jesus does not promise to take away our struggles, to make our life easy, to spare us from having to undergo our wilderness experiences. After all, he had his own wilderness experience, an experience that transformed him. Jesus promises that he will give us what we need to go through it, what we need to survive it, and, like Elijah, what we need to be spiritually and psychologically transformed by it. He promises us that we will not go through it alone.

As our spiritual discipline in this blessed season of Lent, let us experience and celebrate the healing, comforting, empowering presence of Christ not just when our life is going well, but also (and perhaps more importantly) in all the wilderness experiences of our lives.

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