

“The Pout”
Text: Psalm 43; I Kings 19:1-18
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...But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die...I Kings 19:4

Elijah was the most famous prophet in Israel in the 9th century before Christ. In any roll call of Old Testament greats, Elijah is singled out because of his mighty deeds as they are described in the Books of I and II Kings. He had the power to withhold rain from the earth, and the power to make the rain fall. He was able to raise the dead. He could call fire down from heaven. And at the end of his life, he ascended into heaven in a whirlwind that swept him up from the banks of the River Jordan. He lived a very dramatic, heroic life.

In one of the books of the Apocrypha, written in the 2nd century, are found these well-known words: “Let us now praise famous men.” It comes from Ben Sirach, a book in the Apocrypha. The writer praises Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Isaac, Jacob, Joshua, Caleb, all the Judges, David, Solomon, Elijah, and Elisha. Elijah's miracles are especially exclaimed over. We are told that Elijah “sent the kings of earth to their destruction,” that he was able to “calm the wrath of God,” but here's the interesting part: not a single reference is made to any of the non-heroic aspects of Elijah's life. Completely edited out of the narrative is Elijah's encounter with the nameless widow at Zarephath, who was not considered important. Hers was just a little story, a simple human need.

Nothing is said about the day Elijah fled in terror from Jezebel. Not a word is mentioned about the day he sat under the broom tree in the midst of nowhere, asking that he might die, or of the time 40 days later when he hid in a cave in the side of a mountain and was unable to shake off the most famous case of burn-out in human history.

Many people like to have the stories of their heroes burnished so that they shine only with light. A lot of people want to keep their heroes on pedestals, high above the rest of us mortals. Don't tell us about the dark side! Or, the other extreme – Tell us everything about the dark side, so that we can smash both the pedestal and the idol.

The Bible doesn't like hero-worship very much. The Scriptures give us the full story, hardly ever the purified, sanitized version. Think of King David. We are told of his betrayal of his loyal comrade Uriah and his adultery. Think of the Apostle

Peter, who denied his Lord three times before the cock crowed, the disciples who vied with one another as to who would sit on the right hand of Jesus in the coming kingdom. Think of Martha who got irritated with her sister Mary because she, Martha, had to be out in the kitchen rattling the pots and pans while Mary sat at Jesus' feet.

You hear the whole story in the Bible. We see the humanity of the people. We overhear their prayers and come to realize that their lives and ours are not so dissimilar from each other, that their prayers are not dissimilar from our own prayers. In the 43rd Psalm that was read earlier – “Why have you cast me off?” the Psalmist asks in anguish. Anybody here ever felt deserted by God?

Harry Emerson Fosdick reminded preachers many decades ago that no one but the preacher comes to church desperate to discover whatever happened to the Jebusites! We come to look in the mirror and see ourselves as we are and as we can be through the transforming power of “the one true God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.” (Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA)

Today, I want you to come with Elijah and me to what I would call The Complaint Department, that place in the back of the store where you return the merchandise you bought that you thought might fit, but, it turns out, binds your waist or pinches your toes. You, Elijah, and I are on one side of the counter; the Holy God, the one God of Israel is on the other. Elijah, the Lord's #1 prophet wants to turn in his prophetic commission. He has written his resignation; he wants to hand it over because he wants an easier life. This vocation of being a prophet and of risking it all does not fit him anymore. It costs too much. He doesn't even ask for a refund or exchange. He just wants to hand his current life over, sit down, and die.

Let me review for you how our undaunted hero became such a pooped prophet, flat out of faith, flat out of courage, without the strength to go forward. Ironically, it had begun at the moment of his greatest triumph. You recall from Sunday before last that king Ahab had forsaken the commandments of the Lord, was following the Baals, and had invited the people of Israel to do the same. Elijah, on the Lord's command, had declared to the king that it was not going to rain until Elijah said that it would, and a three-year drought ensued. This was particularly insulting to Baal, who was the most prominent of the Canaanite deities and was believed to be the great storm God. The fertility of the land depended upon the rain this god supplied, so drought was a particular insult to Baal, who actually was not a god but Ahab thought he was.

In the midst of the drought, Elijah asked for a contest, with the Holy God of Israel on one side and the prophets of Baal and Asherah, the goddess of the Phoenicians whom Jezebel particularly liked, on the other. The king agreed, and he called together all the people, plus 450 of Baal's prophets and 450 of Asherah's prophets. They all gathered on Mt. Carmel. Elijah was there alone representing God's side. He stood before all the rest and said to the prophets of

Baal and to the people of Israel, "How long will you go limping around with two opinions? If the Lord is God, then follow the Lord. If Baal, then follow Baal." The people were silent. Two altars were built; wood was laid upon them. Two oxen were slaughtered; pieces of oxen as a sacrifice were laid on the wood. Elijah said to the prophets, the priests of Baal, "You pray for fire to ignite this sacrifice."

They prayed all morning; not a spark appeared. They decided to add their own blood to the sacrifice. They prayed all afternoon. Nothing happened. Nothing. No fire. Then, Elijah prayed that Yahweh's altar would be drenched by water! He was really trying to stuff it up their shirts! The water came. Then, he prayed to Yahweh that his sacrifice would be accepted. The answer came as fire fell from heaven and consumed the offering, the wood, the dust. Fire even licked up the water that was in trenches around the altar. Everybody except the prophets of Baal fell on the ground and worshiped the Lord.

Then comes another bloody part. Elijah immediately orders the "termination" of the prophets of Baal, which took place. Then he prayed for rain, and after an agonizingly tense waiting period, the Lord finally made rain to fall upon the whole earth in great abundance. The drought was over. Yahweh and Elijah had won - a moment of spectacular triumph against unbelievable odds!

Jezebel heard what Elijah had done and issued a death warrant for Elijah. Instead of blowing it off or keeping it in perspective, he immediately fled for his life. Perhaps it was the wise thing to do, but in any case, he fled a day's journey into the wilderness. When he got there, he was a different man from the man who had stood before all the prophets of Baal. He had a sinking spell that just wouldn't quit. Fear had robbed him of the happiness he might have expected. Exhaustion, hunger, and depression overtook him.

It can happen to the best of us, can't it? We all know about post-traumatic stress syndrome, but have you ever experienced what I would call post-traumatic success syndrome? You passed the final. You won the match. You brought the house. You were made partner at the firm. So why aren't you happy? Where did it go? Is happiness not one of the most elusive states? God knows why happiness slips away and hopelessness shows up. I don't believe we are ever as vulnerable as we are at the height of our elation.

Sometimes we have chased after false gods, but this was not the case with Elijah. He had risked everything in service to the one true God, and yet there he was, having won the great victory, but empty as a bucket under that broom tree. He passed out from exhaustion. It seems as if only he and the broom tree are on the scene, but of course the Holy One of Israel is right there sending an angel who touches him and invites him to wake and eat, which he did. Then he went back to sleep. The angel came back and gave him nourishment again, because he had a long way to go.

Here's a simple thought to take with you if you have a terrible trial or time in the wilderness ahead of you. God will provide for you what you need to survive it. It is a simple, profound thought. The key is not to do as Elijah did. Elijah simply forgot about God. He was curled up there under that tree without any expectations at all, the sum of his exhausted parts. He had no prayers to offer. But the Lord had not forgotten Elijah. He wasn't finished with Elijah. He had created the man with a purpose in mind, and by golly, God was not going to lose the whole nation of Israel to apostasy because Elijah had run out of juice! God gave him what he needed to be fortified. Then he traveled for 40 days and 40 nights, arriving at Horeb, which is also called Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, and here we have Sinking Spell #2. In the midst of it the word of the Lord comes to Elijah and says, "What are you doing here?"

Elijah issues his complaints again. "I've been zealous for you. Everyone else has been terrible. I'm just...poor me...I did it all by myself. Now they want to kill me..." Ah the ego! How righteously it reacts when wounded.

The Bible does not record that the Lord rolled his eyes when he heard the complaints again. Instead, the Lord simply says, "Go. Stand outside the cave and stand before me." The prophet does, and you know this familiar part of the story. First, a wind so strong that it splits the mountains passes by, but nothing changes for the burned-out man. An earthquake comes, but the depression does not lift. After the earthquake, then the fire. After the fire, the still, small voice that asks again, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

Elijah covers his face to acknowledge that he knows he's in the presence of God. But believe it or not, he immediately launches in to another rendition of how hard done to he's been! He's tried. People have been terrible. He and only he is left. So on and so forth. This is called hopelessness, this place on the edge of the mountain just outside the cave of despair.

Here's something to take note of: You think it was the still small voice that did it. That's not it. There was the earthquake, there was the wind, there was the fire, there was the still, small voice, and Elijah was still in a funk. The Lord had one more trick up his holy sleeve. He was done with being "pastoral" with the prophet. The Lord decides to ask – no, to make – one active verb command. "Go Elijah." Go back where you came from because that is where you are needed. You need to name a couple of new kings. You need to appoint Elisha as your successor so he can carry on my work in Israel. The Lord had listened respectfully to all the complaints, but there was still work to do that only Elijah could do. There was something greater than himself to think about, an assignment that transcended his personal success or well-being or the lack thereof. God NEEDED him. I think that is the greatest thing in the world, to be needed.

God has created each of us with a particular purpose in mind that only you can do and that only you can fulfill. We don't know when it will end, but we know that

as long as we are here on earth, God wants us to be about God's business, living our lives the way God intends. If you are still breathing in and out, my friends, there is something God STILL wants you to do, NEEDS you to do. And only you can do it.

Usually at this point in the sermon I tell a story that illustrates the point I am making, but I want YOU to finish this sermon now. Think about a time when you doubted whether what you were doing was making a bit of difference and how something happened – probably something not very dramatic – that enabled you to realize that God wanted you to go on, even if you didn't understand the reason, and you were delivered to the far side of despair. Someway, somehow, through the events of your life, you heard God saying to you, "Get up. Get over your fear. Get over your paralysis of self-confidence, or lack of it. Get going. Help those in your realm of existence"

Stress, fear, self-doubt, they are the enemies of God as much as those little gods called Baal thousands of years ago. Yes, our stress, our hopelessness, our fears, can act as if they rule the universe, as if they rule your soul and mine, but they are wrong. Your Lord is the One Holy God, who in time of trouble will rise and shine above you. Your God is the Holy God who will guide your feet and nourish you with enough love and hope to enable you to go on and endure and face whatever odds you have to face. "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Why are you disquieted within me?" Hope in God, for God is your help. What more do you need to know than that?