

Down but Not Out

1 Kings 19:1-18

I remember a phrase that Coach Orta used to say to our team when we were batting, and someone was down in the count. People could hear him exclaiming from the dugout, “You are down, but that does not mean you are out!” For people like me who were learning how to play baseball, Coach Orta’s exclamation was a good reminder that an unfavorable count did not have to result in an unfavorable outcome. The coach’s shout was a good reminder to not give up hope too soon, that all I needed to do was to focus and get ready to hit the next ball in the strike zone.

I know life is not a baseball game. Still, there are times when we are down for the count. We all know what it feels to be in that uncomfortable situation where you either refocus or lose hope.

We all know that life is not all sunshine and rainbows. There are plenty of awful things happening in the world which affect us. We are not immune to difficult situations and the pain they cause. There are circumstances that crack our hearts open and contrite our spirits.

Lately, I have been thinking about the difficulties I have seen people endure. I have seen people dealing with unexpected losses, the loss of loved ones because of death, separation, etc., the loss of jobs, houses, finances. I have seen people losing their health and their basic physical abilities in just a matter of weeks. I have seen individuals losing confidence in themselves and becoming hermits after being the target of really mean people.

One of those people is presented to us in the text we read this morning. Elijah, the great prophet, is one of those individuals that transitioned from confidence to despair in a split second. He had become the target of a powerful, mean woman. Despite all the success he had experienced, the positive events that had marked his life up to this moment were not enough to keep him thriving.

In the Scripture reading for this morning, we find not a resolute prophet, but a tired, weak, troubled, and fearful human being. From the text, we learn that Elijah was down in the count at least once in his lifetime. Due to the adversity he was facing, the prophet opted to go into the wilderness.

At first sight, it seems that Elijah was giving up hope. His prayer, “*I’ve had enough... take my life,*” may lead us to think that he did not want to live anymore. Yet, we need to remember that Elijah was “*running for his life*” (v. 3). The prophet

wanted to live indeed; perhaps, not the kind of life he was living, but a different kind of life.

I have seen people running for their life... chasing money, status and possession... running from alcohol, to drugs, to multiple, unrestrained relationships... people running and chasing the wind ... people not finding fulfillment but finding themselves at the verge of giving up... praying Elijah's prayer: "*I've had enough... take my life.*"

In light of Elijah's story, I learn that these individuals don't really want to give up. Upon a closer study of the text, I have concluded that more than death, Elijah was craving peace and a renewed sense of purpose. However, the prophet was not translating his intentions into healthy practices. The prophet's avoiding, escaping, and running away was resulting in wallowing, in self-pity. But, God gave a little tweak to Elijah's actions. He turned the avoiding and running away into a *spiritual retreat*, bringing the prophet to the next level.

Once again, the Bible is reminding us that God can and will turn our well-intentioned missteps into constructive and useful experiences to bring us up and out of difficult situations with rejuvenated minds, hearts, souls, and spirits. This is great news!!! The Lord corrects and minimizes the gap that many times exists between our good intentions and their applications. This was the case of Elijah who wanted to experience a different kind of life, but the way he went about it was not healthy.

But God not only corrects the ill-effects of good intentions. The Lord also corrects premeditated (calculated, intentional) harm. Let me tell you, I find this to be even more amazing. God can and will turn evil into good.

Joseph's life is a clear illustration of God's amazing transformative power. Joseph went from forsaken to frontrunner. About twenty years after his brothers had sold him as a slave, Joseph spoke before his family of the transformational power of God by using these words, "... *you meant evil against me, but **God meant it for good**, to bring it about that many people^[a] should be kept alive, as they are today.*" (Genesis 50:20 ESV). Isn't this great news? God transforms well-intentioned missteps as well as calculated, destructive actions into good.

Certainly, Elijah was down but he was not out. God was tweaking Elijah's actions to bring relief, peace, and a renewed sense of purpose. Whether Elijah perceived it or not, the Lord was sustaining him. Up in the mountain, down in the wilderness, in the confinement of the cave, God was with Elijah. The presence of God was

with Elijah in his running away, his laying down, and his hiding out. God was with Elijah; and in the same way, God is with us.

The psalmist wrote, “*you are familiar with all my ways... Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there*” (**Psalm 139:3,7-8 NIV**). Church, God is everywhere, surrounding and comforting us with his presence. There is nothing that can prevent God’s presence from reaching us.

True! There are many times when we cannot perceive God’s presence. This happens for several reasons. For instance, the deafening presence of physical needs. Elijah was worn out and part of the process of bringing him to a healthier place required him to eat and rest. God provided a place of rest and fed Elijah to strengthen him and help him recognize his presence. What I see here is God honoring our basic material needs because our spirituality is closely connected to our corporal experience and wellbeing.

I love the command of the angel, “*Get up and eat.*” Isn’t it great that God commands us to eat? Just this week, my wife asked me, in kind of a mean way, “Are you eating again?” My answer was, “Honey, I am sorry, but I am obeying the word the Lord just gave me, ‘*Get up and eat.*’”

Another reason why many times we missed God’s presence in our lives is because of our own expectations. Some scholars say that part of Elijah’s problem was that he was creating a compulsive habit for experiencing God’s presence in spectacular and supernatural ways: fire coming down from heaven, torrential rains, great droughts, etc. That’s perhaps the main reason why the prophet went to Horeb, the mountain where God had talked to Moses face to face and had revealed to the people of Israel with extraordinary demonstrations of power. Probably, Elijah was looking for a spectacular experience.

Part of the lesson to Elijah and to us this morning is that God is also revealed in gentle ways. God not only reveal himself in the supernatural, but also through the natural. In the midst of the deafening silence of painful experiences, among shouts of joy, in the summit of the mountain, as well as in the deep of the valley, God is with us, revealing God-self to us. Through the loving presence, the unreserved generosity, through the wisdom, admonishment and kindness of God’s creation, God reveals to us.

Are we expecting God to be manifested in a specific way, or are we open to see God’s goodness and power being manifested in our lives in new, surprising ways?

There is an interesting detail in this passage. Elijah had to remain attentive to perceive the passing by of the Lord. From the reading, one can infer that Elijah was not only watchful, but also silent before the presence of the Lord; otherwise he would have not been able to hear God's gentle whisper.

We need to learn how to be silent in the presence of the Lord. Many times, we stand before the presence of God with our arguments and complaints. We master the art of talking, but we need to learn to be still and listen to the voice of God.

In prayer, we need to listen more than we speak. This is a biblical principle. God told Moses, "*Be still and see God's salvation...*" Many times, the prophets called the people to be still before the presence of the Lord. We need to be still, so we can experience the personal, intimate presence of God in our lives.

I love the fact that God whispered to Elijah. It gives us the idea that God was really close. It makes me think of the times I have held my children in my arms and whispered in their ears words of consolation, to reassure them and let them know how much I care. So, for me it's not hard to imagine God holding Elijah against his chest and saying to him, "*What are you doing here big crying baby? Put on your manly pants!!!*"

The story ends with God giving a fresh sense of purpose to Elijah. The prophet was not out, he was still in play, he had work to do. "*Go back, anoint Jehu, anoint Hazael, find Elisha and anoint him as well. I have fed you, given you a place to rest, intimately spoken to you; go now and do the work I created you for.*"

Church, life hits hard at times. There will be moments when we will be struck down. But God is always by our side, being our refuge and strength, nurturing, nourishing, and sustaining us. As Paul wrote, we are struck down but never destroyed. In the words of my youth baseball coach, "You may be down in the count, but that does not mean you are out." In difficult moments (when you are/feel down), we need to retreat, find shelter in God's presence, be watchful, and in silence let God's gentle whisper revive us and give us a renewed sense of God's purpose for our lives.