

Sermon, Proper 7C, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, Jane A. Beebe

“The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He 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. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:8-9)

Elijah is one of my favorite prophets, and I love his stories. One of the original superheroes, the characters of *Marvel Comics* have nothing on him. He even gives Superman a run for his money, showing that one need not actually fly to be “faster than a speeding bullet.” When we catch up with Elijah in today’s passage, he has just accomplished an extraordinary thing. The Israelites have been led astray by Ahab and Jezebel into worshipping Baal during a period of severe drought. In order to demonstrate that the one God of Israel is indeed the living God, and powerful, Elijah sets up a kind of contest between Baal and God. Elijah, all by himself, goes up against 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah suggests that they each choose and prepare a bull for sacrifice. The bull is to be cut into pieces and laid upon an altar with wood, but no fire is to be set.

Elijah then says to the prophets of Baal, ‘...You call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.’” (1 Kings 18:24) The prophets of Baal are abject failures at calling down fire. Despite all their efforts, there was “...no voice, no answer, and no response.” (1 Kings 18:29) The prophets of Baal are even described as “limping” around the

altar they had made. Elijah mocks them saying, "...Either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." (1 Kings 18:27) (I love the element of comedy Elijah brings to the story). What I find most telling is that whatever Baal is purported to be, Baal has no voice.

Then Elijah asks the Israelites to draw near. He then proceeds to completely rebuild the altar to God that had been thrown down previously. He uses twelve stones to represent the tribes of Israel. He builds a trench around the altar. Then he puts the wood in order, cuts up the bull, and lays the pieces on the wood. Anyone else exhausted yet? To demonstrate God's power beyond all doubt Elijah asks that four jars of water be poured on the offering, including the wood. This is done not once, but three times so that everything is completely drenched. Elijah calls upon the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel saying, "Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." (1 Kings 18:37) When God's fire comes down, everything is consumed including the stones and the dust. It even licks up the water that was in the trench. Needless to say, the drought too ends.

For his trouble, Elijah's life is now threatened by Ahab's wife Jezebel, which brings us today's scene. He flees in fear all the way to Beersheba, a distance of one hundred miles. Leaving his servant, he travels another day into the

wilderness, finally falling asleep under a broom tree. Our superhero is finally at the end of his resources; he is worn out and depleted. Perhaps in his exhaustion he even questions whether he wants to go on living. He no longer feels worthy.

It is not everyone who would choose to go into the wilderness in such a condition. Yet the motif of the wilderness is powerful throughout Scripture. Perhaps it is because in the wilderness there is nothing between us and God. In Exodus the people are led through it with pillars of fire and pillars of cloud. Moses encounters a burning bush, Jacob a ladder. Even when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, he is tended by angels and animals. Elijah, too, encounters an angel.

This angel seems surprisingly human in the compassion they show to Elijah, not awakening him abruptly but touching him. The food he is offered is simple: water and a freshly baked cake. I can almost imagine the scent of it. Now Elijah is able to really rest. The angel awakens him once more, exhorting Elijah to eat and drink again for, “otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” Somehow the angel seems to know where Elijah is going. On the strength of this “angel food cake,” he is able to travel forty days and forty nights to Mt. Horeb, known as the mount of God. “Forty days and forty nights”: where have we heard that before? Elijah finds a cave and spends the night there.

Then God asks Elijah this simple question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Notice that God calls Elijah by name. The question can be phrased a

couple of different ways. *What are you doing* here, Elijah? Or, what are you doing *here*, Elijah? Last year I had to have a routine medical procedure that required my being anesthetized briefly. When I arrived for my appointment, I was struck that each medical professional I encountered, the nurses, the anesthetist, the surgical assistant, and the doctor, first asked me my name and asked me to spell it: J-A-N-E B-E-E-B-E. They, in turn, told me their names. Each also asked me my date of birth: 11-15-1955. Finally, I was asked, “Why are you here?”

Each time I was asked this question I responded obediently with the five-syllable name of the procedure—not so easy when one is a bit stressed and light-headed! Later I began to think about how, considering the greater scheme of things, I might have answered that question. Why am I here? Under the circumstances, maybe a philosophical or theological discussion wasn’t called for. And yet there was something about the encounter with this medical team that stayed with me. Each one of them smiled and looked me in the eye. They gave me their full attention and made sure that they had mine as well. I was made to feel cared for and valued—even known. They were clearly exercising their calling; I, in turn, received the gift of greater health and wellbeing. At the end of the procedure, perhaps like Elijah in the wilderness, I was offered graham crackers and grape juice.

There may be times in our lives when we are pushed past our endurance—and yet it becomes clear that God isn't finished with us yet. When Elijah is asked by God, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah answers, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (1 Kings 19:10) What comes through most clearly and poignantly to me is Elijah's lament: "I alone am left..." What will restore Elijah's exhaustion? What will lead him out of his cave and his sense of isolation? God offers nothing less than the fullness of God's presence. There is a great wind, an earthquake that breaks the rocks, and a fire. Yet God's voice, when it finally comes, is as gentle and still as a breath. As we hear in our psalms this morning, "By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life." (Psalm 42:8)

In acknowledgment of God's presence, Elijah covers his face, and comes out of the cave. God repeats the same question, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" While Elijah gives the same answer, word-for-word, something seems to have shifted. God tells Elijah, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." (1 Kings 19:15a) Elijah goes on to anoint Hazael king over Aram and Jehu king over Israel. He also anoints his disciple and successor Elisha, literally passing on his

mantle. Listen for this question from God: “What are you doing here?” It may signal a turning point—even if going on seems too difficult, or even impossible.

That question has haunted me this week. June 21 is the anniversary of when I began the road to sobriety from debt. With God’s help—and the assistance of angels in the wilderness—I have gratefully experienced 18 years of freedom. Tomorrow, June 24, is the feast of St. John the Baptist, and the second anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. I may not have had the experience of seeing God pass by on Mt. Horeb, yet I can continue to try to be open to that “sound of sheer silence” or the “still small voice.” Last evening at dusk, I was taking one more walk near my condo. In the evening quiet I could hear the beautiful call of a wood thrush. Perhaps it was singing, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” (Psalm 42:11)