

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Fugitive or Pilgrim”

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1 Kings 19:1-15a

*19*Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, ‘So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.’ ³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

⁴ 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: ‘It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’ ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Get up and eat.’ ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The 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.’ ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. ⁹At 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?’ ¹⁰He answered, ‘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.’

¹¹ He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ ¹⁴He answered, ‘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.’ ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, ‘Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.’

For the next two Sundays we will look at the story of the prophet Elijah. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, from my formative Sunday School days, the Elijah tale has always been one of my favorite stories in the Bible. Sometimes it seems to be that the prophets of the Old Testament were like many of our modern sports heroes

today. Some worked quietly, others with zest and flair. All had their admirers and supporters. All had their enemies and detractors. I mean, that contest on Mt. Carmel was much more spectacular than any Wrestlemania event! Elijah, against all odds defeated the prophets of Baal! His sacrifice was consumed by fire while the others went untouched. And the crowd went crazy! We're not talking about a standing ovation or a wave. Everyone threw themselves to the ground exclaiming, "The Lord is God; the Lord alone is God." And Elijah stood nearby, holding that championship trophy, enjoying the cheers of the crowd while the prophets of Baal were taken out and killed.

As much as I like the story of Elijah, I am not so sure I like the ending to this kind of contest. Can you imagine what kind of NBA Finals we would have if the winners were cheered and honored while the losers were taken out and killed? That just seems a bit drastic. I suppose that course of action would have eliminated a lot of potential free agents. But on that day, high upon Mt. Carmel, Elijah was the winner. While athletes today may quickly and almost thoughtlessly credit their success to God, Elijah could have done it without any argument. He had God's help, and with God's help, the prophet he seemed truly invincible.

Alas his joy and popularity were short lived. Wicked Queen Jezebel, a worshipper of the false God Baal, heard about the slayings of the defeated prophets and she immediately cancelled the plans for the Elijah victory parade. Instead she demanded revenge. She put out a death sentence on the prophet and in fear and shame, Elijah was forced to flee into the wilderness. In a matter of hours he had gone from the victorious hero to the fleeing fugitive.

In the safety of the wilderness he covered himself with the shade of a tree and prayed quietly, "It is too much for me, Lord. Take away my life. I might as well be dead." Strange words indeed coming from the winner of the great contest on Mt. Carmel! It just couldn't be! But after Jezebel's threat to his life, such was the loneliness, the fear, the doubt, and even the absence of God in Elijah's life. He felt he could not go on. The powers of authority were against him. The people were against him. Now it seemed that even God had forgotten him.

Although I am not a soccer fan, I have been watching the World Cup matches with some interest. I was fortunate enough to attend one of the World Cup games at the Pontiac Silverdome in 1994. I remember during the competition that year, Columbia played the United States. Late in the game, one of the stars of the Columbian team, a player admired and even worshipped in his homeland, had the misfortune of accidentally kicking the ball into his own goal. His team lost by that one goal. Upon returning to Columbia, this former hero was greeted by irate soccer fans. His life was literally ruined. He had disgraced his country. He was forced to go into hiding. So great was his shame that he could not return to his hometown or see his relatives. Days later, an angry mob discovered his hiding place and killed him.

Elijah's circumstances were much like that. As he prayed for his own death that day, he was not a criminal yet he was a fugitive. He was in hiding. He was living on the run. He was in the exile. He wasn't going anywhere in particular but was going away from something-in this case the wrath of Queen Jezebel. There was no purpose to his wandering, and no purpose to his life. His future indeed was totally without direction.

In the story *Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll writes of Alice speaking with the cat. She asks, "Will you tell me please which way I might go from here?" The cat replies, "That depends a great deal on where you want to go." Alice says, "I don't care where I go." The cat then smartly answers, "Then it doesn't matter which way you go."

Alice considers the advice for a while and sighs, "As long as I go somewhere." The cat nods and says, "Oh, you are sure to go somewhere if you keep walking long enough."

Such were Elijah's travel plans. He was a fugitive. He wasn't going anywhere in particular. He just wanted to go somewhere-someplace to get away from the thing that was chasing him and causing his fear, his pain, his uncertainty, and his sorrow.

After he prayed for a merciful end to his life, Elijah fell asleep under the shade of a tree. It was there that an angel appeared to him, leaving him with sustenance, a loaf of bread and a jar of water. These gifts were God's nourishment for what was yet to be. When Elijah awoke, he ate and drank and suddenly felt a renewed purpose for his journey and his life. The angel came a second time and told Elijah to journey to Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai, the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. There he was to find a cave where he spent the night. In the cave God spoke to him, not in the glorious certainty of a thunderous earthquake and not even in the calming sanctity of silence. God spoke to him in a much more ordinary way, in conversation which reminded him of the sacred nature of his own life journey.

"Why are you here? Why aren't you where you are supposed to be?" That is what God asks Elijah. Oh, Elijah has all sorts of reasons. He alone has followed God's will. Everyone else is against him. He is powerless in his solitude. But God wants Elijah to know that he is alone and afraid only because he is running away from the tasks before him. God wants to know who Elijah will choose to be. God wants to know whether Elijah will be defined by his fear of Queen Jezebel or by his faithfulness to God. Author Lawrence Farris states that God is really asking, "How can you fulfill my purposes if you are not where I need you to be." Elijah is called back into action, back to the calling to which God enlisted him, because it is in this calling where he will find the true presence of God.

From this point on in life, Elijah was no longer a fugitive. He was now a pilgrim. He was no longer on a pointless journey away from something and someplace. He was now on a sacred pilgrimage in the quest of something real and important. He had been addressed by God. He had been sustained by God. He had been reminded of his calling by God. He was now a true prophet, with a purpose in mind, a message to speak, and an intention for his life.

Most of us recall that our Congregational ancestors were first called Separatists. They separated themselves from the Church of England, therefore distancing them from the rest of society. They lived under the threat of arrest and persecution. They had to worship in secret places. They were forced to wander off to Holland to escape the religious tyranny of the English crown. In a sense, they were religious fugitives, running away from authority and worshipping as they could on the lam. Later, when those Separatists crossed the Atlantic to establish Plymouth Colony, they became more commonly known as Pilgrims. Their journey came to take on a sacred mission, one to establish Christ's free church. Like it did for Elijah, God's presence inspired them to cease a wandering and risk a journey with a defined purpose.

As travelers along life's highway, we must ask ourselves about the status of our own journey. Are we living as a fugitive might, fleeing our fears, avoiding responsibility, neglecting the truth, ignoring our purpose? Or are we living as pilgrims-aware of the direction we are going, understanding that what we do makes a difference, and seeking the intention of God in all we do? Do we live our lives looking behind at what might be chasing us, unable to stop and reflect because of our anxiety about tomorrow? Or do we spend our traveling in assurance that we are on the right path because we live in the confidence of faith in a God who will never let us lose our way?

Like Elijah, we are called to be pilgrims. It is the pilgrim who has heard and responded to the call of God. It is the pilgrim who trusts in God's purpose in the daily journey of life. It is the pilgrim who finds the sacred in the ordinary. It is the pilgrim who in the midst of doubt and despair finds a reason to be.