

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 27, 2017
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church
Pastor Charles Heup

1 Kings 19:9-18 (NIV)

There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10) He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." 11) **The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by."** Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12) After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. 13) **When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.** Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14) He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." 15) **The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came,** and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16) Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17) Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. 18) **Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him."**

Friends in Christ,

There's a popular saying that says that when the going gets tough the tough get going. Words like that might motivate a football team to play a little bit harder or a sales team to become a bit more aggressive. But if a person tries to turn those words into a philosophy for life they will ultimately realize that such a philosophy is bound to fail. Sooner or later we will run into a situation which forces us to realize that we don't have the power or ability to tough it out. The life of a Christian is often riddled with fears, doubts, and distractions. We often encounter situations in which we are compelled for one reason or another to acknowledge our need for the Lord. Jesus' disciples found themselves in such a predicament in our Gospel lesson for today. How glad they were to discover that the Lord was there when the going and the rowing got tough on the storm tossed Sea of Galilee.

The account of Elijah in our OT lesson and sermon text has long been one of my favorites. It shows us a powerful man of God in a state of despair at a time when he had every reason to be very up beat. Elijah had challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest to see whose God would answer prayer. The god who would send fire to consume the sacrifices they had prepared was to be regarded as the only true God. The idol Baal could not answer the cries of the heathen prophets but the Lord answered Elijah's prayers sending fire from heaven and enabling him to kill the 450 false prophets of Baal. After the victorious face-off between the Lord and Baal on Mount Carmel, the prophet was dejected by the thought that he alone followed the Lord. He was afraid because wicked Queen Jezebel had threatened to put him to death. And so Elijah did what comes naturally to a sinful man – when the going got tough he got going – he ran away. He was discouraged and depressed and the Lord came to him with his angels to strengthen him for a 40 day journey to Mount Horeb. 600 years earlier the Lord had appeared to Moses in a burning bush and commissioned him to be the leader and prophet of his people at Mount Horeb. This was the Mountain where the Lord gave Moses his sacred Laws. When Elijah got to Mount Horeb he went into a cave and spent the night. Like Moses centuries before Elijah was in desperate need of reassurance from the Lord.

It was in that cave that Elijah learned once again that

Theme: The Lord is there when the going gets tough

1. To encourage us with his promises
2. To guide us in our tasks
3. To assure us that we are not alone

While Elijah was in the cave ... **the word of the LORD came to him: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"** The Lord's question compelled Elijah to examine his motives for being there. If Elijah had been honest in his answer he would have acknowledged that he was there because he needed the encouragement of the Lord's promises, the guidance of the Lord for his tasks and the assurance that he was not alone in his efforts to serve the Lord. But consumed by self-pity, as he was, Elijah would hardly have been able to come to that conclusion on his own. None-the-less the Lord would patiently and gently provide Elijah with what he needed. The Lord patiently listens to Elijah's response. **"I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too."**

It is really hard to imagine a prophet who had been as zealous for the Lord as Elijah had been. In the chapters that precede our text, we hear of a prophet who boldly announced that the Lord would not send rain unless Elijah commanded it. For three years Elijah relied on the Lord to sustain his life. First, he was fed by ravens. Then the Lord provided a never ending supply of flour and oil to a widow lady who cared for Elijah. When the widow's son died, Elijah called him back to life. Finally, Elijah went back to Ahab and asked the Lord's prophet Obadiah to announce to Ahab that he had returned and wished to challenge the prophets of Baal to a contest to determine who the true God really was. Then at Elijah's word the Lord sent rain on the land. All this seemed to be to no avail. No one – at least no one of significance as far as Elijah was concerned – believed in the Lord. Instead of turning to the Lord in repentance, Israel had turned against Elijah the prophet who had shown them that the Lord was the true God who was almighty.

For the most part Elijah presents an accurate picture of the way things were – but his comment about being the only left is a bit exaggerated. Earlier I mentioned the Lord's servant Obadiah. Obadiah had told Elijah about how he had provided safety and shelter for 150 of the Lord's prophets – in his self pity Elijah had forgotten. He didn't completely see things as they really were. Sometimes in our self pity we don't see things clearly either. We need to have our vision corrected by the Lord's promises which assure us of his abiding presence.

The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12) After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.

Perhaps Elijah had expected the Lord to come with a show of awesome power but after each show of force, we hear that the Lord was not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire. On occasion, the Lord does use hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires and other power acts as his tools to evoke awe in the hearts of his people, to test and strengthen their faith. And at times, he uses them to judge the ungodly. More often than not though, the Lord doesn't show his presence in that way. He does it calmly, gently – in a still small whisper. Elijah was aware of the Lord's presence in the whisper. **When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.**

Often when the going gets tough, we need the gentle side of our Lord to show. We need the assurance that the Lord is the gracious and compassionate one, who is slow to anger and abounding in love and

faithfulness. We need to see our Savior Lord who describes himself as gentle and humble in heart and who invites us to come to him when we are weary and burdened. We need to see the humble Lord who entered Jerusalem – riding on a donkey – and shed his innocent blood on the cross as the payment for our sins to assure us of our forgiveness and to make us worthy of the Lord’s blessings. We need that soft quiet message of the Gospel to lift us up and to prepare us for the tasks the Lord has in store for us. We need that message to draw us and others into the Lord’s church so that we might enjoy a blessed fellowship with him and our fellow believers.

On Mount Horeb, God taught Elijah to wait patiently for the gentle whisper of the Gospel to enter the hearts of men and do its blessed work. That’s a truth that all those who are zealous for the Lord and his church today need to take to heart lest we grow impatient with the battles that confront the church and with the seeming lack of progress and advancement of the Lord’s cause that is so often evident. As we patiently wait on the Lord and rely on his gospel rather than on the club of the law – the Lord will quietly work behind the scenes to accomplish his objectives.

When the Lord came to Elijah, he not only learned that the Lord was faithful to his promises to be with him he was also guided in his tasks. Elijah probably had not been pondering his next move. But the Lord already had Elijah’s next task all planned out for him. **Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 14) He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too." 15) The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. 16) Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. 17) Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu.**

Elijah was still wallowing in self-pity when the Lord told him to get up and get to work. The Lord had a threefold assignment for Elijah. 1) Head back the way you came beyond Israel and anoint Hazael as the king of Aram. Aram would become the Lord’s tool to bring judgment to the worldly Israelites for years to come. 2) Then Elijah was to anoint Jehu as the future king of Israel. Jehu also would become a tool of the Lord to bring an end to the rule of Ahab and Jezebel. 3) Finally Elijah was to anoint Elisha as his successor – a sure sign that the Lord would continue to let his word be proclaimed to his people.

Although the Lord speaks of bloodshed and acts of judgment, he had not forgotten his grace and mercy. In fact many in Israel would see the failures of the Baals to protect them and turn to the word of the Lord as proclaimed by the Lord’s prophets. After experiencing so much turmoil in their land, many would be eager for the peace of the Lord’s Messiah. Learning firsthand that “God cannot be mocked” many would repent of their shameful ways and come to trust in their Savior-God.

Today the Lord doesn’t come to us directly with his assignments – but he clearly has tasks for us to do. Through his church, he calls full time servants to serve his people. In his church he also enables and equips individuals to serve some in positions of leadership, some on various committees, and some ever so quietly that almost no-one is even aware of the service they render to the Lord and his church. Just as the Lord did not want Elijah to wallow in self-pity and despair so the Lord wants us to work in his church with the ability he gives and to leave the results to him.

The same could be said about our personal lives as well – the Lord has made it clear that whatever we do we are to do it all to the glory of God. So, we will face the dilemmas of our personal lives with confidence in the Lord’s promises, seeking his will as revealed in his word and trusting him to lead us and use us in answer to

our prayers. When the going gets tough, the Lord is present with us to comfort us with his promises, to guide us in our tasks and to assure us that we are not alone.

Through this section of Scripture Elijah has lamented that he is all alone. It almost seems as if the Lord has ignored what Elijah had said. But the Lord heard and the Lord knew better. And now the Lord let's Elijah in on a "secret". **Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel--all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."**

Those words must have been especially encouraging for Elijah. He had been vastly outnumbered when he challenged the prophets of Baal. The Lord had shown him that the Lord alone was all that Elijah needed. If the Lord is on our side who can be against us? But while we know that the Lord is all we need we like Elijah rejoice to know that the Lord has others who are willing to fight the good fight of faith along with us. The Lord who sees the hearts of men could assure Elijah that his public preaching as well as the private teaching of Obadiah and the hidden prophets had not been in vain. 7000 souls in Israel were part of the Lord's church. Today too the Lord has a remnant of the faithful who together with us are willing to serve him and proclaim his wonderful message of love and forgiveness. May we also thank the Lord for our brothers and sisters in Christ even as pray with them and for them.

At times it seems as if little is accomplished by our efforts to serve the Lord. The Devil appears to win one victory after another as he continues to challenge us and interfere with the Lord's work. Our society grows more and more wicked and fewer and fewer seem interested in the truth – the times are tough. But as we have seen from the example of Elijah when the going gets tough the Lord is there

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Amen.