

Many say that the most fascinating character in the Book of 1 Kings is not a king at all but the prophet Elijah. What we know thus far about the prophet Elijah is that he was a thrill seeker, a “troubler of Israel” (1 Kings 18:17), a storm chaser, if you will, a pyrotechnic kind of a guy. Ever known anyone like that who lived for drama?! If it was big and powerful, Elijah seemed to like it. My Old Testament professor, Walter Brueggemann, says that “there is more drama in the story of Elijah than that of almost any other biblical character. He was a mighty warrior for the Lord, and we get the impression that he enjoyed it” (Vol. 2 sermons). I mean who doesn’t like the taste of power?! He confronted King Ahab twice and lived to tell about it. He pronounced the drought that lasted for three years until God brought the rain. With God’s help, he helped a widow’s son come back to life, yeah, we didn’t go over that part of the story. Last week we experienced the big demonstration of the showdown on Mount Carmel, the victory over Baal. Now everyone will surely know the one true God of Israel. What I didn’t cover last week was the very violent killing that Jezebel did of some of God’s prophets as well as Elijah’s pursuing of the false prophets, killing all 450 of them after the showdown. Why? Because it’s too much in the midst of life as we know it. The Old Testament, especially, has many stories of violence- bloodshed in the name of religion. It’s a lot to unpack, especially in thinking about God and God’s role. What I will say is that there is a formula in this story in which God speaks to Elijah, and it goes something like this...”the word of the Lord came to Elijah.” When Elijah chose to kill those false prophets, there was no recorded word from the Lord asking him to do so. Remember all along when I’ve said that Elijah

wasn't perfect?! I believe that violence is NEVER the answer. Well, after a day like Elijah had with the Lord sending down the fire that even licked up the water surrounding the altar and then executing those men, one would assume exhaustion. But no, "flush with victory, Elijah was ecstatic to think of how the whole nation had now been won for the Lord. How could God have made his message more plain than he had on the mountain" (Brueggemann)? So like a wild man, Elijah "girded up his loins" (18:46b) and ran and ran and ran, (hence those running club t-shirts that read, "Run like Elijah!")- he ran alongside King Ahab's chariot until they arrived at the entrance of Jezreel. Elijah's adrenaline was pumping so much so that he eventually crashed. And that's where we pick up in today's story. Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

This past week has been rough for many reasons. One I will highlight was the threat of federal grants and funding being cut off that left many of our partners, including Meals on Wheels, Homes of Hope, United Housing Connections, just to name a few, who receive federal funding, in this community and beyond, feeling afraid for their jobs and the important work that they do. It also left me feeling some despair for the people we serve here at Triune. We need that funding in order to TRY our best to get people housed. We're working with the city, downtown businesses and fellow service providers to do a housing surge here in Greenville over the next two and a half years, which is a heavy lift, but that all depends on philanthropic money as well as federal funds. Thanks be to God that executive order was rescinded a day or so later, but you can still feel

people's, including my own, anxiety, fear, and despair. The words of one of Wendell Berry's poems, *The Peace of Wild Things*, came to mind. *When despair for the world grows in me, and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be...I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Berry's words bring peace for a moment but those feelings of fear, bewilderment, and despair still stir within me and the community of service providers, even the ones like us who aren't federally funded. The prophet Elijah knows these feelings well. He demonstrates well the risk a prophet takes. God never said there wouldn't be storms in our lives nor consequences for our risks. Elijah chooses not to rejoice at the wins. Instead, he looks inward, overwhelmed by disappointment, danger, and defeat. He thought that what God did on Mount Carmel had changed the people's hearts, but it didn't. He thought that Queen Jezebel would now bow down to the God of Israel, but she didn't. King Ahab went back and told his wife what Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the Baal prophets with the sword, and she became undone. The Queen said that if she didn't kill Elijah in the next 24 hours, then the gods needed to take her life. Elijah ran- but this time for his life- to a territory where the queen had no jurisdiction- 100 miles away. He left his servant there in Beersheba, and he went on even further away from Jezebel into the wilderness and lay under a broom tree, wishing to die, and fell asleep. To say that Elijah is

defeated and deflated would be an understatement. He wants to die, as he feels there is nothing left to live for. After the fireworks on Mount Carmel, God appears to have fizzled out. His enemies are closing in, and Elijah wants to end it all. Some of us can relate to Elijah.

What gets me is that this wild man prophet who appeared so tough is now running in fear of Queen Jezebel's death warrant. You mean to tell me that Elijah the prophet is human like us?! Of course he is, and he has a right to not be okay! It is okay to not be okay sometimes. Understandably Elijah is despondent. Three years of toil, sacrifice, and danger with nothing to show for it. Baal still rules the religious roost in Israel. Elijah still hasn't been any more effective than the prophets before him. He is a homeless fugitive whose energy and courage have deserted him. Just when he wants his life to be over, the Lord sends an angel, who tells him to "Get up and eat" (v.5b). Elijah ate and then went back to sleep. The angel of the Lord came a second time and said again, "Get up and eat." But this time the angel told him why. If Elijah didn't eat, the journey would be too much for him. Notice that the angel doesn't minimize nor dismiss the difficulties of Elijah's journey. She never says, "Elijah, pick yourself up by your bootstraps and get over it!" or "You made it this far; it's downhill from now on" or "Once you eat what I've prepared for you, things will be smooth and easy" or "What has happened to your faith? No. She says. "Eat because the journey is hard, and you won't make it if you don't eat" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). Notice the gentle touch of the angel- twice- as well. Elijah got up a second time and ate and drank. With some strength

renewed, Elijah manages to journey for forty days and forty nights until he arrives at Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God, where he takes shelter in a cave. Though he doesn't yet know it, the Lord has brought him on a retreat (Brueggemann).

Then...here comes the formula I mentioned earlier..."The word of the Lord came to him" and asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" What kind of question is that? Does God not know? Maybe it is a rhetorical question? Elijah responds to God with how faithful he has been and while the other Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, Lord, he hasn't. As a parent and a pastor, I try to listen not only to what is being said but sometimes even more so to what is not said. Notice what Elijah doesn't say here. He tells of Jezebel's killing of Yahweh's prophets, but he says absolutely nothing of his involvement in killing Baal's prophets. Like God doesn't know. Then Elijah says he's all alone, and his life is in danger. This isn't the only time Elijah says it. But first God tells Elijah to go and stand on the mountain for I am about to pass by. Where else have we heard this? Moses on the same mountain where he also communed with God, saw God's backside and received the Ten Commandments. Back to Elijah. After the most famous part of today's passage with the wind and earthquake and fire and then silence. God asks him again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" It's almost like Elijah recorded his first response and pushed play because he said the exact same thing. I must confess that when I first read the text this week with some colleagues, I bemoaned Elijah's whining. Really, Elijah?! You're

exaggerating, my friend. You're having a pity party. But then God slowly slid a mirror in front of me to see myself and how I sometimes whine and complain on repeat. Don't we all at times? "Nobody is on my side!" we say. "Nobody understands me! I haven't had any successes! I've knocked myself out for nothing! I've been abandoned! Elijah can't see beyond his own grandiosity. He thinks he's the only worshiper left in Israel. He has ceased to trust God. The Lord's great plan is no longer in mind. But again, the Lord is very good to Elijah. He has fed him, strengthened him, and spoken to him" (Brueggemann).

I'm guessing Elijah, who loved drama, was looking for God in these big, powerful things. But God wasn't there. No, the word of the Lord is not found in any of these dramatic phenomena. God was heard in the sound of sheer silence. I imagine this may have been a disappointment at first for Elijah, but we aren't told. Where are the special effects? At the very least, I bet Elijah was surprised. Aren't we all? Yet, it is through the word that God achieves God's purposes- not through big, spectacular shows of force. God is in his Word. It's interesting that the gospel passage paired with this story in 1 Kings is the one in Luke's Gospel (9:54-58) where the people of a Samaritan village refused to receive Jesus. The disciples, James and John, were seized by vengeful feelings and said, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" "That's just like Elijah, isn't it? Burn up all the enemies! Here's what the Lord said to James and John. 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head' (9:58). The Son of God, the incarnate Word,

has not come in fire, or thunder, or great demonstrations of power. His power is of another sort. It is the power of the Creator of the world, and it is the power that steps away from power. It is the power that offers up God's self in suffering love: the still, small voice" (Brueggemann). What about Elijah, then? We're told that he wrapped his face in his mantle so that he could hear the Word of the Lord, who gives him his new marching orders and says, in effect: "By the way, Elijah, don't be so self-important; you aren't the only faithful servant I have, I have reserved myself seven thousand people that you didn't even know existed (v. 18). Hearing this, Elijah submits to the voice of God. He has learned humility" (Brueggemann). One doesn't always get the answer one wants from God in prayer. God's timing is God's timing. In the face of Elijah's exhaustion, God provides exactly what he needs: food and rest. God doesn't berate or chastise Elijah for running. Instead, God listens and makes his presence known to Elijah in a very powerful way. God is gentle and kind to Elijah, just as God is to us. God's provision never ceases. Who are the angels God has sent your way, their arms full of journeying bread? When they invite you to eat, do you accept their invitation? At Christ's table, we, like Elijah, are fed, strengthened, and sent out equipped for the arduous journey to which God has called us. "Jesus knows better than anyone that the journey is hard. He knows it's too much to handle on our own. He knows we need bread that sustains. Get up and eat" (Thomas)! For God is still God and God is still good! Help us to hear. Amen.