

Sermon I Kings 19:1-16
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1 Kings 19:1-18 The Message

19 ¹⁻² Ahab reported to Jezebel everything that Elijah had done, including the massacre of the prophets. Jezebel immediately sent a messenger to Elijah with her threat: “The gods will get you for this and I’ll get even with you! By this time tomorrow you’ll be as dead as any one of those prophets.”³⁻⁵ When Elijah saw how things were, he ran for dear life to Beersheba, far in the south of Judah. He left his young servant there and then went on into the desert another day’s journey. He came to a lone broom bush and collapsed in its shade, wanting in the worst way to be done with it all—to just die: “Enough of this, GOD! Take my life—I’m ready to join my ancestors in the grave!” Exhausted, he fell asleep under the lone broom bush. Suddenly an angel shook him awake and said, “Get up and eat!”⁶ He looked around and, to his surprise, right by his head were a loaf of bread baked on some coals and a jug of water. He ate the meal and went back to sleep.⁷ The angel of GOD came back, shook him awake again, and said, “Get up and eat some more—you’ve got a long journey ahead of you.”⁸⁻⁹ He got up, ate and drank his fill, and set out. Nourished by that meal, he walked forty days and nights, all the way to the mountain of God, to Horeb. When he got there, he crawled into a cave and went to sleep. Then the word of GOD came to him: “So Elijah, what are you doing here?”¹⁰ “I’ve been working my heart out for the GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies [or God of hosts],” said Elijah. “The people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed the places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I’m the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me.”¹¹⁻¹² Then he was told, “Go, stand on the mountain at attention before GOD. GOD will pass by.” A hurricane wind ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks before GOD, but GOD wasn’t to be found in the wind; after the wind an earthquake, but GOD wasn’t in the earthquake; and after the earthquake fire, but GOD wasn’t in the fire; and after the fire a gentle and quiet whisper.¹³⁻¹⁴ When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he muffled his face with his great cloak, went to the mouth of the cave, and stood there. A quiet voice asked, “So Elijah, now tell me, what are you doing here?” Elijah said it again, “I’ve been working my heart out for GOD, the GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies, because the people of Israel have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship, and murdered your prophets. I’m the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me.”¹⁵⁻¹⁶ GOD said, “Go back the way you came through the desert to Damascus. When you get there anoint Hazael; make him king over Aram. Then anoint Jehu son of Nimshi; make him king over Israel. Finally, anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet.

I'm grateful for the chance to share in worship today. Like many people, I've manifested the grief and stress of the week in some physical illness, so I'm a little weak in the knees today. But since I'm the substitute for the interim, or, you might say, the substitute for the substitute preacher, I thought I would stay the course. Besides, after the events of the last week, I have about ten sermons I'm bursting to preach, so I suspect if I were too hoarse to speak this morning I would have someone read my manuscript while I sat in a chair behind them, poking them with a stick at appropriate moments.

I'm usually known for preaching short sermons, which is one of the secrets to getting repeat invitations. My difficulty this week has been winnowing down the things I feel called to say, narrowing the focus to a single sermon.

In the end I was helped by the fact that I had to turn in the material for the bulletin two weeks ago, since Harper needed to print it before she left for her vacation. It is not quite the liturgy or the text I would have chosen if I had put it together this week, but in the end, perhaps it is just what we need.

If you were here two weeks ago, you'll remember Margot preaching on the prophet Elijah, and the way he survived a time of famine through the miraculous sharing of resources with a foreign widow and her son. The story continued after the text that Margot shared with us to tell how the widow's son became ill and died. The widow asked Elijah what good it was to have a holy man in the house if your son died, and Elijah responded by praying for God to resurrect the son from the dead. Which God did. Centuries before Jesus and Lazarus. In fact, many of the miracles performed in the New Testament by Jesus were performed first by Elijah.

Elijah is what you might call a "big deal" in the Bible. All three Abrahamic faiths consider Elijah a grand poobah of prophets, one of the top tier people of faith.

In many branches of Judaism today, a chair is set out for Elijah during important rituals like circumcisions, a cup is poured and a door opened for Elijah every year at Passover, and Elijah's return is invited in the concluding hymn of many families' weekly Sabbath celebrations.

In the gospel stories of Christianity, we are told that John the Baptist physically resembles Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), "Shaggy, and wearing a leather belt." Later, when Jesus asks his disciples who people say Jesus is, they reply "John the Baptist, or Elijah." When Jesus is transfigured and glows like a light bulb on the mountain top, it is Moses and Elijah who appear with Jesus and the gathered disciples.

In the third Abrahamic faith, Islam, we read in the Quran God's affirmation of Elijah's faithfulness:

- Peace be upon Elijah! This is how We reward those who do good. He is truly among our believing servants.

— *Qur'an, chapter 37 (As-Saaffat), verse 129–132*

- And Zachariah and John and Jesus and Elijah, they were all from among the righteous

— *Qur'an, chapter 6 (Al-An'am), verse 85*

Elijah, in all three Abrahamic faiths, is a righteous dude. In our scriptures, in first and second Kings, Elijah calls down droughts, multiplies food, participates in resurrection, calls down fire from heaven (something Jesus's disciples occasionally wanted to imitate), and eventually goes directly to heaven in a great fiery chariot. If you've ever sung "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," Elijah is the fellow the chariot originally "come for to carry home." He has flash, miracles and power. In most places, he reads more like one of Marvel's Avengers than like a simple prophet.

And that's, perhaps, what got him into trouble.

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the rulers of Israel, had decided that the way to find peace and joy in the land was to eliminate all the people who called God by a different name, whose religious rituals were not the same as their own. Let's hear that again. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the rulers of Israel, had decided that the way to find peace and joy in the land was to eliminate all the people who called God by a different name, whose religious rituals were not the same as their own. Mind you, these were primitive people living thousands of years ago, so it is not like modern, evolved people would do such a thing. Ahab and Jezebel called the sacred Baal and Asherah, and Elijah and his co-religionists called the sacred Yahweh. (Where many of our Biblical translations call God "Lord," the original Hebrew calls God "Yahweh.") So the king and queen set out to kill the priests of Yahweh and did this pretty effectively until Elijah was one of the only priests of Yahweh left.

So Elijah called together four hundred and fifty priests of Baal, and in a great duel of prayer and sacrifice, competed to see which name of the holy got more results.

The priests of Baal lost and Elijah took a page from Ahab and Jezebel's playbook and had the people kill all the priests they could find who called the sacred being Baal.

Because this is what happens, you see. Our enemies threaten us and we take on the very tactics we despise, until it is hard to distinguish us from them.

Elijah kills those who have killed his people. He avenges and conquers. But instead of a sense of triumph, he discovers the lesson of the Hatfields and the McCoys. He learns the lesson of thirty years of troubles in Northern Ireland. Every time you take revenge, the families and allies of those you've killed now wish to take revenge on you.

Violence breeds violence which breeds more violence.

As our text today opens, Elijah is fleeing for his life, condemned by Queen Jezebel to suffer the same fate as the priests of Baal. The flames of victory turn to ash in Elijah's mouth and he flees the country, runs to the wilderness, curls up under a broom tree, and prays to die.

I'm not sure what a broom tree is. At least, not as trees go. But I know I've been under one before. We all have. All of us who battle to figure out how to live a righteous life, all of us who fight for social justice, all of us who spend the least bit of effort trying to figure out how to make the world a little more fair, a little more just, a little more sane....all of us eventually end up crouched under a broom tree.

I had planned to talk this morning about Juneteenth, back when I turned the bulletin in two weeks ago. Today is Juneteenth. I'm willing to bet many of us here don't even know what Juneteenth is. [A show of hands confirmed this.] According to Wikipedia, as of last month 45 of the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia recognize Juneteenth as either a state holiday or ceremonial holiday, a day of observance. The 45 states who recognize or observe Juneteenth include all of the southern states. Juneteenth, short for June nineteenth, celebrates the fact that one hundred and fifty-one years ago today, three years after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the slaves in Texas and the rest of the confederate south were finally set free.

The first people of African descent stepped foot in New England in 1619, one year before the Pilgrims arrived in 1620. From 1619 to 1865, the situation for people of African descent went from bad to worse in North America, with the institution of American slavery growing like a cancer in size and in depravity. Juneteenth

marked the end of that particular expression of racial oppression in our country. Juneteenth is a day worth celebrating. You might go home and read the Emancipation Proclamation. Many people sing the spiritual I've already named, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." However you do it, I urge you to celebrate Juneteenth. Celebrate the victory.

But acknowledge the broom tree. As in Elijah's story, it doesn't take long to get from "Yay, we won!" to "Oh, my God, they want to kill me!" We soon progressed to Jim Crow, the radical Christian terrorism of lynching, and mass incarceration.

Earlier this week we marked the one year anniversary of the shooting of nine people in a Bible study in Charleston. Shot specifically because the shooter decided the beautiful brown color of their skin made them "other."

Juneteenth is a miracle, a transformative, amazing, immeasurable step of progress toward the light. But oppression always finds new expressions: some violent and overt, some subtle and difficult to recognize. For every stride we make for justice, for racial justice, economic justice, gender justice, there will be new attacks on our spirits, our laws, and our lives.

It's a funny thing, preaching. When I chose this text and planned this bulletin, I thought I would have to coax you under the broom tree with me and Elijah. I had no way of knowing what would happen a week ago on Saturday night in my home town of Orlando, or how firmly the emotional shockwaves of that event would plant us in our own emotional wilderness, under our own scraggly broom trees, with past victories turning to ash in our mouths as we struggled with our grief, our shock, and our own newly reinforced sense of vulnerability.

I had no idea a couple weeks ago how desperately I would need to read this story.

I've been emotionally exhausted this week. I haven't hit Elijah's level of depression or wished to die, but I've found enormous comfort in the fact that Elijah, grand poobah of the prophets, hero of the Abrahamic religions, miracle worker and representative of God, Elijah did get that depressed. It happens. When you fight the good fight and life keeps throwing you back three steps for every step you take forward, the anger and frustration build up and turn inwards and depression settles in, sapping our energy and robbing us of our hope.

It doesn't mean we lack character or lack faith. It just means we are human. We grieve and despair.

Elijah, nestled under the broom tree, had a hard time getting out of bed in the morning. Or the afternoon. Or the evening. He didn't feel like doing much except sleeping.

So God sent an angel to poke him. The angel shook him awake, pointed out a nice little loaf of bread the angel had baked, possibly angel food cake, told him to eat and drink. Elijah, ate the meal without saying a word, and went back to sleep.

The angel later shook him awake again and repeated the food delivery, this time telling Elijah to eat up because he had places to go.

Elijah ate and drank, journeyed for 40 days and 40 nights to the mountain of God, then went in a cave and went back to sleep.

Then the word of God came to Elijah, and told him that God was coming to visit, that the very being of God would soon pass by that cave where Elijah slept. There was a mighty, hurricane force wind that ripped through the mountains and shattered the rocks, but God wasn't to be found in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, shaking all around, but God wasn't in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a roaring, consuming fire, but God wasn't in the fire. After the fire was a gentle and quiet whisper. When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he covered his face with his cloak and stood in the mouth of the cave and talked to God about his troubles.

If you are sleeping under your broom tree this week, watch for the angels. One of my angels this week was my Facebook friend Byron. Byron is pagan, and she and I call the holy by different names, we practice very different rituals and traditions. In the time of Ahab and Jezebel and Elijah, we might easily have found ourselves on opposite sides of a holy war. But living today we share an understanding that community is richer and faith deeper when we let each other be without trying to push each other out. And while we use different language, I often find her posts push me to truths in my own tradition, in my own religious language. This week she was the angel, encouraging me to take nourishment and to tend to self-care in a time of grief.

She posted a web page titled "101 self-care suggestions when it all feels like too much." <http://themighty.com/2016/04/self-care-ideas-for-a-bad-day/>

I won't read all 101 suggestions, but here are a few towards the top:

>>1. Have a good, long, body-shaking cry.

2. Call a trusted friend or family member and talk it out.
4. Say *no* to extra obligations, chores, or anything that pulls on your precious self-care time.
6. Dial down your expectations of yourself at this time. When you're going through life's tough times, I invite you to soften your expectations of yourself and others.
7. Tuck yourself into bed early with a good book and clean sheets.
11. Look at some really gorgeous pieces of art.
14. *Ask for help.* From whoever you need it – your boss, your doctor, your partner, your therapist, your mom. Let people know you need some help.
15. Wrap yourself up in a cozy fleece blanket and sip a cup of hot tea.
16. *Breathe.* Deeply. Slowly. Four counts in. Six counts out.
17. *Hydrate.* Have you had enough water today?
18. *Eat.* Have you eaten something healthy and nourishing today?
19. *Sleep.* Have you slept 7-9 hours? Is it time for some rest?
20. *Shower.* Then dry your hair and put on clothes that make you feel good.
21. Go outside and be in the sunshine.<<

The author of the list of 101 ideas for self-care didn't put it in exactly these words, but I think Elijah would tell us to listen out for our angels.

While we never stop hitting road blocks or experiencing tragedies, and we never stop finding new ways oppression and despair enter our world from all sides, we always are provided with angels. With angel food cake baked by loving hands. We encounter surprising sources of grace.

Here are some of the little experiences of grace I have found in the last few days:

I have found allies this week in places I never expected to find allies in my lifetime. Many of them within my own family of origin's religious traditions.

This week, one hundred and fifty-one years after Juneteenth, the Southern Baptist convention adopted a resolution repudiating the Confederate Battle flag. The vote passed by more than 90 percent, as they urged their members to stop displaying the

flag, with one representative saying “all the confederate flags in the world are not worth one soul of any race.”

This week I heard the bells of my childhood Methodist church in downtown Orlando peal 49 times during a time of community memorial, and I saw my home church and my home denomination make huge strides in becoming a community church and place of justice and welcome.

This week I saw video of a district superintendent (a sort of Methodist poobah) addressing the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist church, a setting in which I have seen years of denial and judgment about the LGBTQ community, but this week, on behalf of the Bishop and Cabinet, the district superintendent read a statement that included the following words: “We unequivocally stand against words and deeds *and our complicit silence* that do harm to anyone anywhere and particularly those against the LGBTQ community. We pledge ourselves to the demonstration of love of God’s children.” I then watched as almost everyone present at the meeting of the annual conference stood to vote to accept the statement as their own. None of that would have happened a few years ago.

The denominations a lot of us grew up in still have a long way to go. But I was stunned at how far they’ve come in the last few years, and perhaps, in the last week.

Our own congregation still has a long way to go. After our Transgender 101 workshop and panel over the past two weeks, we’ve started to realize what a long way our congregation still has to go in living into our pledge to be Open and Affirming. Part of the broom tree experience is discovering that we’ve not made as much progress as we’d like to think.

For all of us, there’s a lot of noise right now. Lots of wind, earthquakes, and fire. Social media is full not just of signs of hope and grace and cat videos, but also full of lots of fighting and noise.

Elijah reminds us to listen carefully, because often the loudest noise is not the voice of God. We have a lot of important social justice work still to do, but we need to listen carefully from our caves and let the loudest noises blow by before we cover our faces to engage in holy conversation. There’s a lot flying around about violence and guns, religion and race, gender and orientation, politics and justice. With so much at stake, we can’t just enter the fray (and add our own noise) without really getting in touch with the quiet voice of what is holy and sustaining.

The last take home I would offer you from the Elijah story is a slight nod to Father's Day. God's contribution to the chat with Elijah after all the noise and drama is to send Elijah to go commission Elisha the younger, the one who will journey with him and carry on the prophetic work. Elisha the younger, the one who follows in Elijah's footsteps, will perform more miracles than Elijah, in fact, twice as many...32 miracles in the Biblical account compared to Elijah's 16.

Elijah's journey, accompanied by Elisha the younger, goes on for quite a while before he catches the chariot, comin' for to carry him home. Elijah, exhausted from years of battles and setbacks, finds new life in the energy of the next generation.

This has been a hard week, my friends. We still have many twists and turns in the road ahead of us. But for today, remember to honor your grief and exhaustion. Look for the angels and the snacks that sustain you. Don't focus on the loudest noises, but instead on what is holy and life giving. And give thanks to the fact that we share our burdens, both with those who came before, and with the stunning gifts of the younger generations who bring new life and new miracles to the world every day.

Amen.

