

When You Just Want to Stop  
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First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC  
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1 Kings 19: 1-15

For the past three years, some of you have been very frustrated. You couldn't see anyone, talk to anyone in person; all you could do was Zoom, and you found that terrible. Others were happy to have some solitude — but for years? Aren't you ready for things to be "back to normal"?

This passage picks up the story in the middle of a longer story. Elijah has had his confrontation with the prophets of Baal. Their offering was not accepted, but his was, after he dumped a lot of water on the wood, just to prove the point. His offering was accepted, and he ended the drought he'd promised, and he defeated the four hundred prophets of Baal in a battle. This is all in chapter 18.

Then of course Jezebel the queen threatens to have him killed by tomorrow afternoon. He panics, and runs far to the south, into the wilderness.

Let's pick this up at verse 4: "take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Did you ever feel like this? Did you ever just want to give up?

I have known cancer patients, and people with incurable conditions, who say they just want to die. To end the pain. To stop being a burden on others. I understand that — no one lives forever. At some point, you just want to stop.

The first time I ever heard the phrase, "suicide by cop" was in a newspaper article. A young man had brutally killed a couple of children not far from our house, and terrified everyone. He went into hiding. The police were able to figure out who did the crime, and eventually found him. He confronted the police with a knife, and despite repeat calls to stop, he attacked them. They shot him. At some point, you realize you aren't getting out of punishment, and some people choose to die instead.

We can talk about suicide victims too. People decide they just want it to stop, whatever "it" is. They want to end everything. And so they do.

Let me say that if you do this, you may think you aren't affecting anyone else, but you are. You leave behind a bunch of friends and mourners who may have a hard time getting over losing you. So don't do this: it isn't the easy way out you think it is, and there is always hope.

But not all causes for despair are so final. There are divorces, job losses, even retirement at times, which all can cause a person to feel like there is no reason to go on. You wish life would just stop! A spouse dies, and people feel there is no reason to continue living.

Elijah just wants to give up. He is tired, and thinks that there is no one else who is faithful. He thinks that he alone is left. He is filled with self-pity, and wants to die. We have all felt that on occasion. I submit to you that there is always hope, no matter how bad it is.

Then an angel comes and tells Elijah to get up and eat: stop feeling sorry for yourself and take some nourishment! He does, then he has a nap, then he is awakened again, and eats again. The story says he went for a long time on the strength of that food. He traveled forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God, a sacred place in Israel's history.

This is the same spot where Moses met God. Moses too was gone for forty days and forty nights — a Hebrew way of saying “a very long time.” Moses received the Law on Horeb. Another name for Horeb is Mt. Sinai. Elijah is presented as the new Moses. There are some similar moments in the Moses stories, when he was tempted to give up and stop.

Then the Word of the Lord came to him, and asked, “what are you doing, Elijah?” He responds that he has been very zealous, very dedicated to God, yet the Israelites have abandoned God's ways, have turned over the altars, and have killed the prophets of the Lord. Now I alone am left, he says.

On the face of it we know he exaggerates. It is the evil queen Jezebel who seeks to kill him, and she is a foreigner. The people have not all abandoned God's ways. They are not all seeking to take his life. This is how people sometimes talk when they are depressed and anxious. “No one cares; everyone is against me.” Etc. etc. We know it isn't true; we know it is a sign of their illness. But exaggeration is a part of it.

God says to Elijah, “step outside, for I am going to pass by.” Again this echoes the accounts of Moses, who was permitted to see God's back as God went by. Elijah prepares himself to see God.

First there is a great wind, so strong that it split rocks and mountains. But the Lord is not in the wind.

Then there is an earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake.

Then there is fire, but the Lord is not in the fire.

All these signs are things you might expect to accompany the presence, the coming, of God. You might expect the Lord God to be accompanied by wind, earthquake, and fire. By the loud sounds of trumpets, by signs and wonders of every kind. But no! God is not in them.

Then Elijah hears a voice, a still small voice, the “sound of sheer silence” as our translation has it. There is God!

So, are we to look for great signs and wonders? Or perhaps, just listen in the silence.

Richard Foster you may have heard of, he is a kind of spiritual guru for many people. He writes,

As we learn to wait and to work in a posture of stillness we are being changed. We begin living in the steady peace of God, a peace that goes down to the very depths of our soul. We begin experiencing an unhurried conquest; an inward conquest over ourselves, and an outward conquest over the world. We grow less and less impressed by the religion of the "big deal," and instead find joy in simple acts of goodness. We begin letting go of the need to manage and control life and instead find delight in God working to will and to do his good pleasure.

Word comes again: what are you doing now Elijah? He gives the same answer! They go through all of this, but nothing changes! You'd think Elijah would learn something, but no.

God is like that, though. We preachers talk about how we have to learn this or that about being a faithful disciple. We talk about how spiritual learning is like learning a language, that repeating it over and over is what makes it stick. And that's all true. But we sometimes miss the fact that God is supremely patient, even to the point of irresponsibility! You wonder if God will ever learn? But he doesn't; he is patient, and works with Elijah way beyond the expectations of all of us.

It turns out that God is not finished with him. Elijah is given a task. His work is not done yet. Elijah has to go and anoint several people: he anoints a king in Damascus over Syria. He anoints a king for Israel. He anoints Elisha as his successor. More on Elisha next week! And this is what Elijah does in the rest of the chapter.

So despite his pity-party it turns out well for Elijah. He encounters God's still small voice, and realizes that God is active in the small things of this world as well as the big ones. God is active in the sound of silence and the stillness as well as in the earthquake and the big dramatic wind. In fact, it is pretty seldom in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as in our time that God does something big and dramatic. Usually God acts in the small ordinary stuff of our lives.

Somebody will say something, and you realize, in the midst of it, that God is saying something to you. Somebody will mention casually that they are doing something or giving something to a person, and you realize God is calling you to action. God acts in the small stuff, the ordinary, seemingly inconsequential moments of our lives.

You may not be as self-pitying as Elijah, but you might be as confused. You might not see yet what God has for you to do, what God has for your future. You might have to wait, for God's timing is always best.

So, don't give up. Don't quit. Don't make excuses. Just hang on. You may remember a poster years ago: it had a kitten hanging on a rope, and the slogan said, "when you get to the end of the rope, tie a knot and hang on!" That isn't bad advice. Hang on, for God is

always there, working. God is always ready to help. Not in the way we want, perhaps. Elijah wanted God to take him, to let him die, for there were no people on his side. Of course, he is wrong. But God doesn't chastise him, or berate him. God says, "Elijah, I have work for you to do." And God has work for us to do yet!

Thanks be to God! Amen.