

WHEN WE FEEL AT THE END OF OUR ROPE

1 Kings 19: 1-18

Have you ever felt you were at the end of your rope? Have you ever felt overwhelmed, full of stress, worry, or emotionally exhausted? Have you ever felt totally demoralized or defeated? Have you ever felt like a total failure where it counts or heartbroken in disappointment with certain people? Have you ever felt like you just wanted it all to be over?

Maybe you have felt such things or you know someone who has. Or maybe you have touched the edges of some of these feelings. If you haven't, that's a good thing. But chances are, you will experience something like this because life is like this. We all have a limit and we all hit a limit at some point in life. Hopefully, we will have the support and guidance we need when we do. But sometimes, oftentimes, we feel swallowed up and alone, for all the people around us. People can walk with us so far, but not further. Loneliness and isolation in our pain are big problems for many people and for some of us too.

What I want to do in this sermon is not indulge in negativity. No. What I'd like to do is help channel some divine energy for healing if we need healing, but also, guidance for building some resilience when life pushes us to our limits.

Our scripture reading this morning can really help us find the kind of spiritual pathway to heal, and to get some direction toward building resilience for living life when we feel at the end of our rope.

The prophet Elijah is someone we can all relate to as he lives through what he is living through. He is the first, great prophet of Israel, but you wouldn't know it from the way he is handling the crisis in his life. Not that any of us would handle it any better mind you. He has stood alone or at least he has felt he has stood all alone, against the queen and king of Israel, and a whole cohort of their supporters. Elijah is standing up for God against the priests and prophets of the false God Baal. Queen Jezebel has seduced the royal court with the god Baal, and she has imposed this new god upon the rest of Israel, diluting the single-minded devotion and loyalty of Israel to the God who brought them out of slavery, gave them the 10 commandments, and guided them into the promised land. Human memory can be fluid when it comes to loyalty and devotion. Our commitments can be fickle and wavering. It seems that we humans go after the next best thing, the new thing, the thing we believe will give us more prosperity, success and advantage over our neighbours no matter what moral and spiritual loyalties we may have to give up in the process. Giving up on God and going after Baal is like this. The new always seems so much better than the old, loyalties be damned.

But Elijah is the single sore thumb in the mix, the irritating voice of conscience, the moral voice who won't leave royal Israelites alone to just enjoy their new found pleasures whatever the cost to the larger well-being of the land and its people under God.

But rather than be a hero, Elijah hits a wall. He faces burn out, PTSD, or whatever else we want to call the kind of break down that can twist a person upside down emotionally and spiritually.

Why does this happen to Elijah? Well, fear grabs hold of him. Even though his life will have been threatened before, now, fear for his life grabs hold of him in a way where he panics and runs. He runs into the wilderness to hide. Once he stops, however, he realizes how exhausted, overwhelmed and at the end of his rope he really is. His prayer is this: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' In other words, for all my efforts to steer our people in a different direction, I have failed, just like my ancestors did. I am finished. There is nothing left I can do. It is hopeless. Nothing will really change. There is nothing left to live for. All is lost.

But is this true?... It may feel like it's true in the moment... Tragically, too many people take their own lives or have their lives taken because they feel there is nothing else to live for.... They are so full of overwhelm, stress, pain, guilt, shame, failure, defeat... Sometimes death can seem the only way out...

But several things happen to Elijah to steer him in another, more life-giving direction. The first thing is the most basic of all. Elijah is exhausted, dehydrated, famished. He needs to eat, drink and sleep, otherwise, he cannot make any good decision and he cannot have any kind of perspective with which to move forward. God provides for Elijah. At least that's how Elijah experiences it. There is food, drink and a good spot to sleep where he feels safe. He can just let go...

Second, Elijah makes a connection beyond himself. He not only talks to God; he hears God speak. He gets some perspective, insight and wisdom. He sees a bigger picture than the narrow world of his problems that can swallow him up. Elijah journeys to a mountain known as Horeb, the most sacred mountain for Israelites. This is where people can go on pilgrimage to meet God up close and personal. Another name for Horeb is Sinai. This is the mountain where Moses met God in the burning bush. This is also the mountain where Moses received the 10 commandments. Elijah comes to this mountain to meet God too. Once he arrives at the foot of the mountain, he finds a quiet spot in a cave and sleeps, for a long time. When he wakes he has an encounter with God. Things are beginning to feel a little different already.

When he first ran away he was just asking God for permission to end his life. He was at the end of his rope. Now, after he has eaten, drunk, slept and had some time for quiet meditation and prayer in search of discernment, things are different. 40 days and 40 nights, we're told, it took Elijah to reach the mountain. 40 is the number signifying inner struggle, discernment and testing... once all this happens, he has some clarity so he

can put into words what exactly is going on. And this is what he says: I have been zealous and faithful to serve you, O God, But Israel has rejected me and rejected you. They have killed all of us prophets and I alone am left. And once they track me down, they'll kill me too...

In response, Elijah hears God speak. He emerges from the cave and goes out the mountain ledge. He beholds the vastness. What will he hear spoken? He is looking for a sign... There is an earthquake like tremor. There are peals of thunder and the crack and flash of a lightning strike. There is a fierce hurricane like wind. And after all that has come and gone, Elijah is still there... Will God speak?... and then, there is dead calm... silence... Elijah doesn't hear God in all the grand spectacles and dramatic happenings. He hears God in the silence. There is, finally, silence and calm in Elijah and God speaks to him in that silence. That's when he begins to discern a way forward. Unless he finds that silence, stillness, and quiet calm within himself, he cannot hear God speak, and he cannot discern the way forward.... We too, need to find that place of silence within us.... And unless we find that place of silence within, we cannot hear God speak to us...

What is the way forward for Elijah? He is given direction on what he has to do – anoint several people for their ruling and prophetic tasks. There is still work to be done, hope for the way ahead. All is not lost. God is still in the mix of possibilities. And one last thing. Elijah is not alone. Not only is God always with him to guide him. But there are others too. Maybe they are not speaking out. Maybe they are in hiding. But they are there. Seven thousand Israelites who have remained faithful to God and not given in to the corrupt and brutal regime. Seven thousand may be a small number in a nation that numbers a million or so. But Elijah is not alone. There is God and there are others.

Now, what does this tell us who have or may one day experience being at the end of our rope or something like it?

There are practical things we can do. Self-help books and 12-step programs offer us many such practical ideas. Good nutrition, good exercise and good rest are important. Positive relationships are important. Making some important decisions to let go certain attachments to people and things are important. Making certain commitments and taking up certain practices are important. But our biblical story from Genesis to Revelation offers us something qualitatively different in addition. Like Elijah, feeling at the end of our rope may be a wake-up call. And maybe we don't have to get to the end of our rope to do something about it. Cultivating a relationship with God can make a huge, qualitative difference in our lives.

How do we discern God is speaking to us?

Is it all about me or is it also about the world around me. Elijah doesn't give up on his sense of mission and responsibility for his people Israel. But he does need to step back and gain some refreshment and perspective. 40 days and nights is not a literal number, but it does mean a long time. We need to take the time to re-connect with God or

connect for the first time and then find some silence within us and around us to listen... really listen... For what? For God to give us some clarity, perspective, direction. It's not just about us, but us in relationship to the world around us, to what we can offer the world around us and what we need in relation to the world around us. We can serve, but we also need to step back and find some rest. We can give. But we also need to find some personal refreshment, joy and gratitude.

Too much serving and giving without mindfulness to our own needs can burn us out. Too much self-focus can make us feel isolated and dislocated from our place in the larger world. We need both to be healthy and alive, and a talking relationship with God, with words or the absence of words, can help us find balance again and again as life throws us curve after curve.

Finally, God is speaking to us when we discover that it's not all up to us. The world is too big, life's burdens and responsibilities are too big. We can't control or determine much too much about our lives, let alone the lives of others, and it's not a good thing for us to have such control anyway. God is speaking to us when we find the permission and grace to let go and let be. God is speaking to us when we are energized with fresh conviction to take up a cause or follow a passion or find a new way in a relationship. Letting go on the one side and taking up in commitment on the other are things we can discover altogether new for ourselves in prayerful relationship with God.

We may feel all alone sometimes. The burdens of life can be so big, so all-consuming, so overwhelming, that nobody around us can carry them with us. But as Christians we ought to discover that we are never alone. To have a vivid sense of God walking with us through our journey is an experience that Elijah and many others in our scriptures model for us. May we discover God's presence and speaking into our lives in a whole new way again and again as we make our journey through life... in the exhilarating times, in the restful times, but also in those times when we feel at the end of our rope. God is there at the end of it holding us up, ready to resurrect new life in us... But are we ready for it?

Prayer: Come to us, O God... speak to us so we can hear... hold us up so we can feel you carrying us when we cannot carry ourselves... resurrect us into new life... Amen.