

The Dog Days of Pentecost

I Kings 19:4-18; Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-13

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 7) 2022

Kyle Childress

We're in the Dog Days of summer. According to the official calendars, the Dog Days run roughly from July 3 to August 11. Some calendars date the Dog Days as going all the way through the end of August. The Dog Days get their name from the ancient Greeks and Romans who believed that when Sirius, the Dog Star, was closest to the sun we received our hottest, muggiest weather.

Whatever their origin and however they are officially dated, the Dog Days mean we're in the summer doldrums. Lethargy. Heat. Humidity. Everything and everyone seem to slow down and everything and everyone seem to be down. Given that definition, we're not only in the Dog Days of summer, the Dog Days following Pentecost (back on June 5), but our entire world is in the Dog Days.

We are tired and our tiredness is tied to discouragement. We are worn down and worn out, depressed, and many of us are struggling with fear and anxiety. Plus, we are exhausted by the constant bad news and exhausted from feeling like we are always swimming against the stream. Mean nationalistic religion, and the politics of anger and fear wears us out. And we're not even into the height of the hurricane season.

Which brings us to Elijah in our Old Testament reading this morning. There is more drama in Elijah's story than almost any other biblical character. Back in I Kings chapter 17 the land of Israel is hot, dry, and in a famine, in other words extreme weather. Prices are skyrocketing, supply chains are broken, and people are

hunkered down with anxiety, and hoarding their resources. Meanwhile, the king and queen and their big landowning friends are raking in record profits but deflecting blame by shouting that Israel needs to get back to God. Of course, the god they're talking about is Baal, the Canaanite fertility idol which promised health, wealth, power, and a return to greatness.

In the middle of all this, the true and living God calls Elijah and sends him out into the wilderness essentially to go through a rehab/detox program. To be who God calls him to be Elijah has to learn to see like God and quit seeing everything from the perspective of kings and queens and Baal. Ahab and Jezebel and their kind see the world as something to take, control, dominate, exploit, and extract. Elijah, addicted to their sustenance, has unknowingly accepted their worldview, their ways of seeing and doing. Elijah opposes them but he still does so from within their world and their worldview. God wants Elijah to know that it's not simply about being against Baal. God's calling is more profound and elemental. It's about seeing what's real and seeing people and creation as neighbors and not someone or something to take and exploit. So, God sends him out into the wilderness beyond their world. Beyond their control Elijah has to learn to depend on ravens to feed him, and the water of a nearby creek to drink.

Then God sends Elijah to receive from an outsider, a poor, non-Jewish widow in Zarephath to feed him. This widow is completely dependent upon God, and God uses her generosity and hospitality to feed and nourish the prophet. Though she has little, she shares what she has because she knows all she has is a gift and gratitude means we keep sharing the gift.

But it takes a while for Elijah, for any of us, to be rehabilitated from old ways and dependencies, from our ways of seeing. And Elijah still likes the

dramatic, the powerful, the dominant, the spectacular. He still thinks like the kings and queens and empires.

In chapter 18, Elijah has his famous showdown. One faithful prophet of God against 450 prophets of Baal. It's spectacular. It's dramatic. Elijah wins and God sends fire and then rain, rain, and more rain. Elijah orders the false prophets to be slain and it looks like Elijah can ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after.

This is the kind of victory so many of us yearn for. You know, we can turn things around in one big event. We can save this town, this state, this country, this planet. We can win and win decisively and then it is over and we can go home and live happily ever after.

But it's not over and done with. It never is. King Ahab and Queen Jezebel simply double down in their opposition. There is no mass conversion, no change in the public policy. No change for the better.

When we're accustomed to the big, the dramatic, the dominant, and the spectacular and we expect such to bring about quick change, and then it doesn't, like Elijah we become demoralized and scared.

Queen Jezebel learns from her husband what happened, and she is not one to be trifled with. She sends word to Elijah, "I'm coming for you and I'm coming big."

So Elijah runs. He heads south for Beersheba, the jumping off place before you get to the real desert. And then he goes further.

After journeying for a day, he sits down under a shade tree, in despair, he asks God if he could die. He's a failure. Everything he believes in is under attack and he is completely powerless to do anything about it. He's thinking he should

have asked God to destroy Ahab and Jezebel, but he didn't and now he's angry. Now the anger has turned to depression, and he has given in to despair.

Elijah knows something must change. And he has sunk low enough to know that he needs to begin with himself, and knows he has some serious work to do. He needs to start over. His life is in shambles, so go back to the source to rebuild.

Out in the middle of nowhere, God sends an angel to feed Elijah, encourage him, and strengthen him. Elijah receives, not takes. And then Elijah goes another 40 days until he comes to Mt. Horeb and finds a cave. It is significant that he returns to Horeb. Horeb was the same mountain that God called Moses through a burning bush, where the ground was called holy. It was Mt. Horeb that is also known as Mt. Sinai where God gave the Ten Commandments. This is where Elijah goes. He returns to source of the faith, the roots.

When we're exhausted and in despair, it's time to return to the source of our faith.

All Elijah knows about God is through power and spectacle, so he looks for God in a great storm that passes – winds blow and howl, the earth shakes with an earthquake, boulders tumble down, and then there is thunder and lightning and fire. And the biblical writer tells us that God was not in any of these spectacular things.

Yet, Elijah waits. He listens. And God comes in a still, small voice. God comes in the Word. God's Word. But it is the Word that is quiet. One must silence all the storms outside and inside our lives in order to hear this Word. Elijah's perception of God must change – from one of spectacle to quietness, from looking to seeing, from hearing to listening. From seeing the world as something to control and exploit to seeing the world as a gift.

The cartoon *Wumo*, in the newspaper's funny papers a couple of weeks ago has two superheroes beating up aliens in the middle of rubble and smoking buildings. Some regular person peeks their head out saying, "We're happy you saved us with your awesome combat skills, but could you also help us with some global threats like natural disasters and ending world hunger?" One of the superheroes responds, "Nah, we only handle cool things, like fighting aliens... See ya!"

Elijah thinks like the superheroes, but God is calling him to see differently. To see the way of healing and grace, of community and mercy. The paradox is that the healing of the world comes through these quiet, small actions, not the big, spectacular. It comes, as Elijah is to learn, through a community of people formed in these quiet, small actions.

So, God re-calls Elijah, quietly. God says, "You are to go back to the fray and be the prophet I've called you to be. And by the way, Elijah, lighten up and get over your-self. It's not about you. You are not alone. Quit thinking like a lone ranger. I have 7000 others you don't even know about who are faithful to me and who have not bent the knee to Baal."

"And another thing," God says, "I want you to get some help and start training another prophet. His name is Elisha. Quit trying to do this by yourself. Build a relationship with Elisha. Train him. Learn to work together and not alone."

Hearing this, Elijah submits to the quiet Word of God. He learns humility. He learns to receive, not take. He learns to perceive, to see, and to listen differently. And he learns that it's about community. As a quieter, wiser prophet Elijah returns to serve God and resist Ahab and Jezebel.

The writer James Baldwin says that a major turning point in his life came when he and his friend, the modernist painter Beauford Delaney, were standing on a street corner in Greenwich Village, waiting for the light to change. Baldwin recounts in *The Paris Review* that Beauford “pointed down and said, ‘Look.’ I looked and all I saw was water. And he said, ‘Look again,’ which I did, and I saw oil on the water and the city reflected in that puddle.” In that moment, Baldwin felt he’d been taught how to see, and how to trust what he saw, felt that from that moment on he could see the world differently than he had before.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “In Christ, we no longer see others from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation! Everything old has passed away; see, everything had become new!” (II Corinthians 5:17).

Much of what we do around here, especially in worship, is train you to see differently. To see reality, to really see – that this planet is God’s creation and it and all in it is a gift of God. We learn not to exploit and extract, use and abuse the gifts of God. We learn not to use others for our own desires. Instead, we learn to be conduits of the gifts. We receive, nurture, and then pass them along to be shared with others.

Elijah had to persevere in order to see differently, listen, and be renewed. He ran and walked, worked and kept on until he arrived back to the source of his faith.

What do you need to do in order to return to the Source of your faith?

Our New Testament reading from Hebrews tells us to run the race with perseverance. And it tells us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses to cheer us on. Many of those who make up this cloud of witnesses are told about in chapter 11. They are folks like Elijah who didn’t give up. Who didn’t give in.

But they did what it took to be renewed and transformed in God, so they could persevere, and learn to see as God sees, so they could do the work of God.

And in the Dog Days, let there be no doubt, it is perseverance that we need.

These faithful witnesses of the faith kept on with stubborn trust, with the hot sun beating down on their backs – but their eyes were always fixed on God. And they never gave up on learning to, not just hear, but listen to the still, small word of God.

Now those cloud of witnesses, including Elijah, who persevered, who never gave up, now sit in the grandstands cheering us who come after them.

“Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet” (Heb. 12:12).

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.