

Like Elijah
A Sermon on 1 Kings 19:1-15 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ June 22, 2025

You are striving to follow God's way. You are striving to do the right thing. You are striving to serve and to love. If these things are true for you, then you have probably faced some challenges in your life. If these things are true for you, then you have probably had some doubts about actions you have taken.

This is the message of the Bible. Faithfulness does not lead to an easy life. Faithfulness does not lead to earthly riches or prosperity. Faithfulness leads to a way of life that includes significant challenges. Faithfulness leads us to take on challenges in order to do the right thing, in order to serve and to love. Faithfulness leads us to take on challenging tasks given to us by God. And the challenges sometimes lead us to have doubts, to feel despair about whether we are doing the right thing.

This is the message of Elijah's story. Elijah was one of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, second only to Moses. Elijah lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel about 150 years after the time of King David. Elijah's story is told in the book of 1 Kings.

Elijah lived in a time that was not unlike the time we live in. Elijah lived in the Kingdom of Israel, surrounded by the children of Israel, God's covenant people. In the book of Deuteronomy, the people of Israel are described as God's 'chosen people'. But people who identify themselves as being extremely religious sometimes turn away from God's way of doing things.

In today's passage Elijah says, *the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword*. The people who claimed to be God's people had turned away from God. This was Elijah's first big challenge. He was surrounded by people who claimed to be God's chosen people, but their actions were directly contrary to God's commands. Elijah lived in a time that was not unlike the time we live in.

Elijah faced a second significant challenge. His work was to listen to God and to attempt to speak God's message to the people. Elijah was a prophet, but there were many false prophets. How can you tell the difference between a prophet and a false prophet? A false prophet always says words the leader likes to hear. False prophets flatter whoever is in charge: the king, the president, the governor, the bishop, or the boss.

True prophets speak truth to power. So there was a raging battle between Elijah and the false prophets. In chapter eighteen the conflict between Elijah and the false prophets came to a head, with some very dramatic results. There is always a conflict between those who act like servants of the boss and those who act like servants of God's people. There is always a conflict between those who seek to flatter those in power and those who seek to empower God's people. Elijah lived in a time that was not unlike our own.

Elijah faced a third significant challenge. The King and the Queen hated Elijah because he condemned them for their corruption and lack of faithfulness. In today's passage *Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how Elijah had killed their specially selected crew of false prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah threatening to kill him. Then Elijah was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which is the southernmost settlement in the Southern Kingdom of Judah*. He knew his servant would be safe here, far from the armies of King Ahab.

But he himself went a day's journey further into the desert, far from any towns or villages, and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat."He ate and drank, and lay down again. A little while later the angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get

up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went on the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Mt. Horeb, sometimes called Mt. Sinai, the mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments.

Elijah's story is like your story in some important ways. I am guessing you have never been chased by the king's army into the desert. You may not have been awakened from your sleep by an angel offering your food to eat. You probably haven't travelled forty days through the wilderness on the strength of a single meal. But continue listening, and you will hear the ways Elijah's story is like your story.

At Mt. Sinai Elijah came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

The voice said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then Elijah listened for God's direction. There was a mighty wind, and then an earthquake, and then there was a fire, perhaps the kind of fire that makes crackling and popping sounds, like a campfire. Elijah kept listening, hoping to hear the voice of God, the way others had heard God speaking to them through the sounds of wind, earthquake, and fire. But Elijah didn't hear the voice of God.

Elijah was more discouraged than ever, wondering why he had travelled all this way to Mt. Sinai. *But after the fire there came the sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

Then Elijah repeated his story, almost in tears, *"I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return to your way. Go, return to the work I have given you. Go, return to your home territory in the North. From there go into the wilderness of Damascus."*

If you pay attention, you will see you have something in common with Elijah. Like Elijah, you have been striving to follow God's way. Like Elijah, you have been striving to serve and to love. Like Elijah, you have faced some significant challenges in your life.

As it was for Elijah, some of the challenges you have faced might have come because you were trying to do the right thing. Like Elijah, you may find yourself filled with frustration at being surrounded by people who use the symbol of the cross at every opportunity and yet they don't seem to be following the way of the cross, which is the way of serving God's people, especially the ones who need it most. Like Elijah, you may have worked under the authority of a boss who was not especially interested in serving and empowering the people. Like Elijah, you may have doubts, or you may have had doubts about whether you are doing the right thing.

Like Elijah, you may have had the urgent need to answer the question, "What am I supposed to do now?" Like Elijah, you may have gone on a long journey to try to find the answer. Like Elijah, you may have found yourself alone, and far from home. Like Elijah, you may have found yourself in a place of doubt and despair. Like Elijah, you may have had moments of despair, you might have had times when you felt like giving up. Don't give up on your decision to love and to serve and to follow God's way.

Like Elijah, you may have listened for the voice of God, only to hear nothing. Like Elijah, you may have heard a voice of wisdom and direction. Like Elijah, you may have mostly received the message that you should not give up, that you should return to your way, you should return to the work God is giving you.

All of these things might be true for you, or some of them might be true for you, or none of them might be true for you. No matter whether your story feels like Elijah's story, I pray the end of the story is the same for you as it was for Elijah. At the end of the story, Elijah returned to his work and continued to do God's work, work of truth telling and service.

At the end of the story, Elijah moved past his despair and past his doubts. At the end of the story, Elijah may have had some lingering doubts and fears, but his trust, his strength, and his confidence were greater than before. At the end of the story Elijah had more trust, because he understood God was giving him what he needed. At the end of the story Elijah had more confidence he would be able to use the gifts God had given him to bring some goodness to the world. May it be the same way for you.