

“The Story of Elijah Gives Encouragement”

1 Kings 19:11-21

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Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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In the Old Testament reading today, “the word of the LORD” engages the great prophet Elijah in conversation. Elijah is very discouraged. The situation with Israel looks hopeless. Things had gotten really bad in Israel. Elijah described it like this: “[T]he people of Israel have forsaken [God’s] covenant, thrown down [God’s] altars, and killed [God’s] prophets with the sword, and [only I] am left, and they seek [to take] my life” (1 Kings 19:10 ESV).

So “the word of the LORD” meets Elijah to encourage him and give him instructions; for no matter how bad it had gotten, how bad it looks on the human plane, God is alive and active and working out His judgments and His plan, in response to rebellious and sinful mankind, and in faithfulness to the humble and distressed.

To understand why it had gotten to this point in Israel, we need to back up in the story. Elijah appeared in the Scripture when Ahab was king of Israel and Asa was king of Judah. This is roughly 70 to 80 years after the reign of king Solomon, the son of David. Important things had happened to set the stage for where things were when the LORD met Elijah on the Mountain of God.

After Solomon’s reign the kingdom of Israel split in two, with the northern kingdom, called Israel, and the southern kingdom, called Judah. This happened because of the fall of king Solomon himself.

Solomon had turned from the worship of the LORD, the God of Israel, to worshipping the gods of the peoples surrounding Israel. These false gods were Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh, the god of Moab, and Milcom and Molech, gods of the Ammonites (1 Kings 11:7, 33). So the LORD was angry with Solomon “because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. . . . [Solomon] did not keep what the LORD had commanded” (1 Kings 11:9-10 ESV).

These gods involved a perversion of faith in turning away from trusting the one true living God, who had made heaven and earth and redeemed Israel from slavery and established them in the kingdom in the promised land. These gods involved cult prostitution contrary to God’s will for human sexuality and true worship of God. The worship of Molech also involved child sacrifice, which is horrible and a horror in God’s sight. Solomon brought these things into the kingdom of Israel big time. So God tore the kingdom out of the hands of the line of king David, except for one tribe, the tribe of Judah. The other tribes became the northern kingdom of Israel.

Now we fast forward from the death of king Solomon about 70 years to get to king Ahab. Here is what the Scripture says about Ahab: “[He] did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him.” (1 Kings 16:30 ESV). He added to this that he took Jezebel as his wife. She was the daughter of the king of the Sidonians (1 Kings 16:31). She worshiped Baal.

To please Jezebel, Ahab built an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in the capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel, which was called Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole, in honor of the goddess Asherah. Jezebel had 450 prophets of Baal, and 400 prophets of Asherah. She had also killed a whole bunch of the LORD’s prophets. It seemed like the northern kingdom of Israel had been completely overrun and given over to the worship of these false gods, abandoning the faith and the ways of the one true living God.

So God raised up the prophet Elijah. He sent Elijah to confront King Ahab. Ahab saw Elijah coming. He said to him: “Is it you [Elijah], you troubler of Israel?” (1 Kings 18:17 ESV). Elijah answered: “I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father’s house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals” (1 Kings 18:18 ESV).

That’s the way it always is. When it comes to stirring up trouble, those who have turned from God to follow ways contrary to God’s will as revealed in His word, accuse those who follow God’s word as being the trouble makers. But in truth, it is those who turn away from God’s word and truth who trouble God’s people and God’s kingdom.

Elijah summoned Ahab to a showdown. He told Ahab to meet him on Mount Carmel with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, “who eat at Jezebel’s table” (1 Kings 18:19 ESV). Ahab did.

This is that showdown where Elijah told Ahab to tell the prophets of Baal to build an altar to Baal, while Elijah would build an altar to the LORD. The prophets of Baal would pray to Baal, and Elijah would pray to the LORD. Whichever god caused fire to come down from heaven and consume the altar and the sacrifice on it would be the one true God, which Israel should follow.

So the prophets of Baal did all sorts of things in praying to and worshiping Baal. They called out to Baal. They walked around the altar in an odd way. They even cut themselves with swords until blood ran from their wounds. Nothing happened.

Then it was Elijah’s turn. He gave instructions to have water poured over the altar that he built and the sacrifice that was prepared on it. He gave instructions to pour water over it three times. He built a little trench around the altar to catch the water.

By the way, it is interesting that the water was poured on the altar three times. It reminds one of Holy Baptism.

So then Elijah prayed to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, the only one, true living God. Then fire fell from heaven from the LORD. It consumed the offering and the wood and the stones the altar was made of, and the dust. It also “licked up the water that was in the trench” (1 Kings 18:38 ESV). The words “licked up” makes it seem like the fire was in the shape of a tongue and had purpose and intention as directed by a great mind. So it is, because the fire was from the LORD. This can remind us of the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of tongues of fire over the heads of the Apostles to empower them to preach God’s word and the Gospel of Christ.

The people fell on their faces, when they saw this. They said, “The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God” (1 Kings 18:39 ESV).

Elijah then gave command that the people round up the 450 prophets of Baal. They gathered them at the brook Kishon. Elijah executed them there (1 Kings 18:40). By doing so, he was carrying out the punishment provided by the law of Moses for blasphemy and promoting the worship of false gods in Israel.

Keep in mind, that when it came to the kingdom of Israel, until Jesus came, the sword and civil penalties and faith and true worship and obedience to the LORD were all wrapped up together. This is not the way it is today with respect to God’s kingdom since Messiah has come. God’s kingdom is not like a nation of the world and God’s word and truth is not established and enforced by the power of the sword.

King Ahab told Jezebel what Elijah had done. She vowed by her gods to kill Elijah.

So Elijah was afraid. He ran far away to the south. He went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He sat down under a broom tree. He asked the LORD that he might die, he was so dejected. He said, “It is enough, now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my

fathers” (1 Kings 19:4 ESV). Literally, he said, “I am not good, like my fathers.” Then he fell asleep.

He was awakened by the angel of the LORD. The angel of the LORD had placed some bread baked on hot stones and a jar of water at his head. This happened twice. The Angel told Elijah to eat and drink. Elijah went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights until he came to Mount Horeb.

Mount Horeb is called the mountain of God in the story of Elijah. It was where the word of the LORD met him in our reading today. This mountain was Mount Sinai where God met Moses to give him the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law of Israel after the people of Israel had crossed the Red Sea when they came out of Egypt about 500 years before. We recall that the first commandment God gave Moses was: “You shall have no other gods.”

Now the word of the LORD meets Elijah there, where Elijah had run to get away from Ahab and Jezebel. It seems fitting for God to meet Elijah there in light of how Israel had fallen away from God, who had brought them out of Egypt.

The word of LORD asks Elijah why he is there at Mount Horeb. Elijah answers, “The people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings. 19:10 ESV).

The word of the LORD told Elijah to go out and stand on the mountain. Elijah had found shelter in a cave. Then the LORD passed by. There was a great and strong wind that tore up the mountain and broke the rocks, but the LORD was not in the wind. There was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. There was fire, but the LORD was not in the fire.

This teaches us that God can use the forces of nature and has control over them, but God and nature must not be metaphysically confused with each other. God is not nature, and nature is not god. Nature is God’s creation.

Then there was a voice. It was soft and “thin,” like a whisper. Elijah heard it, with his ears. It was a voice outside his head being spoken to him for him to hear. This was the voice of the word of the LORD. Once again, the LORD asked Elijah what he was doing there. Once again Elijah answered, as he did before.

As we have said, Elijah was discouraged. But then the LORD gave Elijah instructions. Anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, and Jehu to be king over Israel—keep in mind that Ahab was reigning as king over Israel; but God had other plans. Anoint Elisha as prophet in your place.

And then the LORD spoke a judgment: Whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death. And whoever shall escape from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. Then the LORD said this very important thing: “Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18 ESV).

Keep in mind again, that enforcement of the true faith by the sword was the way it was in the kingdom of Israel until Jesus came. But we should also understand that God teaches here that He executes His wrath against unbelief and rebellion. He did it that way then. He does it in different ways now. He will do it in a final and ultimate way at the end of the age.

This is encouragement to Elijah in the sense that God is in control and He executes His judgment, no matter how bad human beings and human society get. But it is even more encouraging for God to say to Elijah, “I have left seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal and lived in the ways of Baal.” This is to say that God preserves a remnant of people who continue to have faith in Him through the Lord Jesus Christ and worship Him as the

only true God. They teach His truth and live His ways, according to His word, even in the midst of a great falling away from God and Christ and the rebellion going on around them.

This is something we should never forget and always keep in mind: God keeps those who are faithful to Him, even when the society that surrounds us is in the midst of a falling away and great rebellion. It is a great encouragement because it teaches us that God and His truth is true and right in the end and will be “the last man standing.” So let us stand with God and His truth.

We do this in Jesus Christ, God’s Son. He is the word of the LORD in the flesh. He is also the angel of the LORD in the flesh, who helped Elijah. He gives the food that brings us to the mountain of God. He stood there one day on the shore of the Sea of Galilee speaking God’s word. He told Peter to lower the nets into the sea. Peter told Him that they had labored all night and caught nothing. They had labored in their own strength.

Let us follow the example of Peter: “Master, at your word I will let down the nets” (Luke 5:5 ESV). Then they caught a whole bunch of fish, so many that the nets were breaking and they filled two boats full. Then Peter made the confession we all need to make at Jesus’ feet: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8 ESV).

I think Elijah was making this same confession in his own way under the broom tree, when he said: “I am not good like my fathers.” This is the confession of the child of God. This is the confession of everyone through whom the Lord would do great things.

Elijah’s confession and Peter’s confession came after a great and mighty miracle and apparent victory. Elijah’s confession came after the victory over the prophets of Baal. Peter’s confession came after the miracle of the great catch of fish. For the child of God, the manifestation of God’s power can show one’s corrupted sinfulness, and one’s powerlessness.

But in the confession of one’s corruption and one’s powerlessness at the feet of Jesus, one is in the right place to be used by Jesus in His kingdom to be part of the great enterprise of “catching men.” In that place, we are saved by Jesus in His death and resurrection. We are lifted up in His grace that results from that, by which He speaks to us peace, I have taken away your sin; I have overcome all things.

And He speaks to us: Now live before Me in my strength, in my peace, and in my joy. Fear not what is going on around you, and the wasting away of your own flesh. For I am your peace, and your life, and have overcome all things. I will lead you in the good way, through my word. I will lead you in the catching of people for my Name as I catch you. Then I will lead you to the promised land, the new Jerusalem, not of this world, in which righteousness dwells, that lasts forever in my resurrection from the dead. Be not afraid. I have won peace for you, and I say to you: “Follow me.” Amen.